

MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

The
GREENSTONE
GRIFFINS



GLADYS
MITCHELL

THE
GREENSTONE
GRIFFINS

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THE GREENSTONE GRIFFINS

GLADYS MITCHELL

 THOMAS & MERCER

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*To RUTH SHEATH, with loving gratitude for all her help with
my books and for her friendship*

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PART ONE

Jessica Denefield

1

Longwater Sedge

Among Jessica Denefield's earliest memories were the reeds and willows alongside the river. There was a muddy path behind the reeds and from it, as she and her aunt made their way towards the little stone bridge, the child could catch glimpses of the water.

At the bridge she and her aunt made their first halt. There was ritual attached to the walk, for, when they reached the middle of the bridge, Jessica was lifted on to the coping with her four-year-old fat legs dangling over the water, bidden to look for fish.

The water flowed fairly fast under the bridge and swirled round the sturdy piers, for there was a weir further upstream. Jessica could not remember ever having seen any fish, but she remembered the mesmeric movement of the water and of how the river weed bent bridgewards under its flow.

Sometimes there were dragonflies near the bank; very occasionally a kingfisher flashed across the reedbeds; more often there was a heron, stilt-legged and watchful, fishing in the shallows.

From this upstream side of the bridge the view was of reedbeds and willows, but here and there a patch of grass, bordered by rosebay willow-herb, went down to the water's edge. Sometimes Jessica and her aunt would picnic at such

a spot and Jessica be allowed to paddle and to attempt to catch the minnows which darted about close inshore.

From the other side of the bridge the view was different. Instead of the long curve of the river beyond which was the weir, there was a straight stretch of water, bounded, as far as Jessica was concerned, by the mill which was her aunt's objective, but between the mill and the stone bridge there was another bridge. This was made of wood and was intended only as a cattle-drive to bring the pasturing beasts from the water-meadows back to a farm to be milked. Its importance to Jessica was that from it she learned to swim from side to side of the river.

The path to the mill was broader and less muddy than the one on the other side and it was not so near the water. The last part of it traversed the water-meadows and here in May were the spotted flowers of fritillary, which her aunt called snakes-heads, and in early June, where the grass was short enough, there were the green-winged orchids following the earlier cowslips.

To a cottage-born child, and before she had been to the Hall, the mill house had almost the dimensions of a palace. It was a white building with a mansard roof, three plain sash windows on the first floor, and two more, one on either side of a dignified Georgian doorway, down below. Jessica's parents were not on visiting terms at the mill, so it was only when she spent an afternoon with her aunt that she was ever taken to socialise with the miller's wife, who had the name for being the biggest snob in the parish. She was invariably kind, however, to the child and provided cake and home-brewed ginger-beer and an occasional glass of raspberry cordial before the aunt and niece returned to the riverside cottage.

This was a tied cottage, like Jessica's own home. Her father was an undergardener at the Hall, but her uncle was the river-bailiff for the estate through which some miles of the river ran. There was nothing but coarse fishing to be

had, but some of the visitors to the Hall enjoyed angling for barbel, roach, chub, and pike. One or two of them—friends of the squire's son—even took an eight-foot rod and the flies which Jessica's uncle tied so neatly and, where the water was clear and when the day was warm, tried fly-fishing for dace.

That Jessica was on visiting terms at the mill was owing entirely to the status of her uncle. As the miller's wife put it to the aunt, "Your man be hobnobben with the nobility and gentry. Stands to reason some of it rub off."

Jessica's visits to her uncle's riverside cottage were not very frequent. They occurred when the squire gave a dinner-party or had weekend guests. On these occasions extra hands were needed at the Hall and Jessica's mother was called upon "to help out." The aunt, who was childless, was always willing to have the little girl, so her mother would take her to the riverside cottage in the morning and return for her when the festivities at the Hall were over. This meant that the little girl had to stay the night, since it was well past her bedtime before her mother was free. When her mother returned to take her home, there were treats waiting for her from the Hall, such as cream cakes, the remains of a tipsy-cake (the village name for a trifle in which the sponge cakes were liberally soaked in sherry), a tumbler of wine jelly, and rich soup which only needed re-heating.

The squire was not dependent upon the estate for his income. He had business interests elsewhere and these, in the end, affected Jessica's future. Some years were to pass before this came about, and six weeks before her fifth birthday she was accepted as a pupil at the village school so that she could begin the autumn term at its commencement in early September. To everybody's astonishment except her own, it was discovered that she could read.

For this, as for the fact that she could swim, her uncle the water-bailiff was responsible. He was a silent man of whom the child was somewhat in awe. She connected him

vaguely with what she had heard about God and had once asked her mother whether God smoked a pipe. She learned by instinct, without having been told, that he disliked childish chatter, so, although she would prattle away to her aunt when they were alone, she would sit silently by while watching her uncle as he turned over his box of flies or experimented with fascinating bits of fur and feather.

Then, when tea was over, down from the shelf would come *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, and, with the four-year-old standing beside his chair, the Dickens-loving river-keeper would point with a flowering rush or a stripped stem of gypsy-wort while the child repeated each word after him.

On the following morning they would go over the short passage again and then the instructor would turn to another page and require Jessica to pick out all the words which she recognised. Six words earned a halfpenny, for the old coinage was still in use. It was a rough and ready method of teaching reading, but Jessica was quick to learn and very anxious to please her uncle, apart from the rich rewards when she succeeded. The consequence was that, by the time she went to school, the child, if not fluent, was at least equal to the six-year-olds and, just after her fifth birthday, she was upgraded to join them.

As for learning to swim, tuition had begun when she was only three. Paddling in the shallows accustomed her to cold water and soon, with her uncle's forefinger under her rounded chin and his firm grasp of the back of the flannelette bathing costume her aunt had made for her, she was splashing and floundering in a couple of feet of water.

The next step was a little frightening at first and involved the wooden cattle-bridge. Her uncle contrived a broad sling made of sacking to which he attached a rope.

"You'm goen to be a big girl and swim acrorst river," he said. "Do 'ee strike out nice and bold, now, and be sure I have 'ee safe on end of rope."

Perhaps a fisherman made the best swimming instructor the child could have had, for he knew instinctively when it was safe to let the line slacken off a little as Jessica gained in confidence, and it was not long before she was supporting herself in the water or, rather, knowing that it was capable of supporting her so long as she trusted it. Her uncle, as usual, said very little, but she knew that he approved of her progress.

The next step was when she waded in from the left bank without the sacking sling, but having it dangled just in front of her as she swam so that if she suddenly panicked she could snatch it. Knowing that it was there, she never did panic and by the time she was seven she was untidy but safe in the water. No other children used that part of the river. Trespassers were not encouraged on estate property, so there was nobody to whom she could show off her prowess except her mother and her aunt.

Except during school hours she was—or might have been, if she had ever thought about it—a lonely child, for all the other children lived in the village, but Jessica's home was a couple of miles outside it. The cottage in which she lived was not more than a hundred yards from the stables which were at the back of the Hall. The head gardener had a much better cottage, but there were no children there for playmates. The head gardener was an elderly man whose wife was dead and whose sons had emigrated. The only other near neighbours were a curmudgeonly old couple already pensioned off by the squire. They lived next door and Jessica was afraid of them.

Jessica, however, was happy enough. Quarrels and rumpuses between neighbours were adult affairs. Once she was able to swim, she was allowed to roam the countryside during the school holidays very much as she pleased. She wandered alongside the river, called in on her aunt, watched her uncle at work with another man in the punt cutting river weed, most of which then had to be fished out later to

prevent it fouling the miller's dam downstream, watched other men cutting reeds for thatching, and sometimes helped her father in their own cottage garden when there were peas and runner beans to be gathered, potatoes to be picked up as her father lifted enough for next day's dinner, currants and gooseberries to be picked from the bushes for pies or jam.

Although, so far as coin of the realm was concerned, the Denefields were poor, there were many compensations. For one thing, owing partly to the kindness of the cook at the Hall, Jessica grew up healthy, sturdy, and tall, for nourishing left-overs from the squire's table and the servants' hall were there for Mrs. Denefield to call for at the kitchen door, and, as they were offered in a spirit of goodwill and without overt patronage, Jessica's mother, with a hardworking husband and a growing girl to cater for, was very glad of them.

There were frequent presents of fresh-caught river-fish, too, from the uncle, eggs from the Denefields' own hens, jam and preserves from homegrown fruit, blackberries, and wild rosehips. There were hazelnuts and, when the corn was reaped, always a rabbit or two came to the Denefield pot or pie.

It was the normal life of any country child of the time and would have been more enjoyable, perhaps, had it not been taken so much for granted and if there had been just a little more money to spare for a trip to the sea or a railway journey.

It was when she was seven years old that Jessica first became haunted (as she thought of it in later life) by the greenstone griffins and was subjected to the strange and frightening experiences which she always afterwards connected with them. They were the property of the squire and she came upon them in a totally unexpected way and by what she looked upon as a quirk of Fate, one of those happenings which can be explained by superstition and a

belief in the occult, but which resist rationality and appear to be subject to none of the natural laws.

Had she been a less solitary child, she might not have indulged in fantasy to the extent that she did, but, from the age of five onwards, she had peopled her own world, a world which, in many respects and like so many introspective children, she preferred to the real world. Looking back, long years later, she could see the fallibility of her childish beliefs, but she could never quite convince herself that the griffins had not been responsible for some, at least, of the sinister happenings which had fallen within her cognisance.

2

A Party at the Hall

Children's parties, either to celebrate birthdays or at Christmas time, were not a feature of family life in the village, but the head teacher kept an eye on the registered birthdays of the five- and six-year-olds in her school. When Jessica's turn came, she was summoned to the majestic desk, given a picture postcard and a sweet, and the school and the teachers sang "Happy Birthday to You," although some young tongues boggled a bit over fitting the name Jessica into this ditty, for no child was ever allowed a diminutive of his or her name. The head teacher had a theory that it diminished human dignity if Thomas was called Tommy. Her own first name was Kathleen and she had suffered (as she saw it) in her youth from being known to one and all as Kitty, and this, she was convinced, had inhibited her for years.

There was one party a year for the schoolchildren, but it was not held in any of their homes. It took place after school in the head teacher's garden in the middle of the raspberry season and was known as the Raspberry Tea. There was also, of course, the Sunday School treat, but Jessica never made enough attendances to qualify for participation in this. The church hall was very near the school and it was felt by her mother that, as the child had to walk to school and back five days a week, there was a good reason for allowing her to stay at home on Sundays.

Soon after Jessica's seventh birthday it became known that at the coming of age (still twenty-one in those days) of the heir to the estate, there were to be great doings at the Hall. Among these was to be a party for all schoolchildren aged seven, eight, and nine. This was to limit the numbers to what the squire's wife, in conference with the head teacher, decided would be manageable under the circumstances. The older and younger pupils were not to be forgotten. Each of the former was to be given an orange and a newly-minted shilling, the latter would receive bags of sweets.

The squire's wife would have been surprised (although the teachers were not) to find that the non-party-goers were bitterly envied by the contingent who had been invited to the Hall. Jessica was only one among many who expressed dissatisfaction and complaint. So high, in fact, did feelings run that, on the Friday afternoon when the largesse was distributed, the infants were sent off at three unless they had older brothers and sisters willing to protect them and their bags of sweets from predators, and the lucky recipients of oranges and shillings were allowed to follow half an hour later, while the luckless seven to nines were kept back until four, lest threatenings and slaughter took place on the way home.

The squire's wife, having made the presentations, drove off to the sound of the dutiful cheers demanded on her behalf by the teachers, and, after the infants and the older children had been dismissed, the seven to nines, as an excuse rather than a reason for keeping them back, were given a homily by their teacher on good manners, impeccable behaviour, deportment at the Hall tea-table, and all the rest of it, and then were issued with their invitation cards which (regrettably, no doubt) the boys made every attempt to flog to the shilling-holders whom they found still at the village shop thriftily pricing up the wares.

Jessica, with two miles to walk, trudged home. Arrived there, she handed the gilt-edged card to her mother and said flatly, "I don't want for to go."

"Of course 'ee wants to go. I've washed and ironed your best pinafore and freddled a pink ribbon through the insertion, and your auntie been and bought you a new pink hair-slide with a bow on it. You got to be upsides wi' t'other little uns."

"Gov'ness says no pinnies. They're for home, not for the Hall."

"Do she now? Well, there's the hair-slide, any road."

"Oh, mum! Do I really have to go? T'other uns, the big uns, they be all give a shillen and don't have to go. 'Tain't fair!"

"Tea as 'ee'll eat 'ull cost a lot more'n a shillen, I'll warrant. Any road, go 'ee must."

"For why, mum?"

"Us can't afford to outface squire, that's why," she was told; to which her mother, with misplaced optimism, added, "You'll like it fine when 'ee gets there." Jessica knew better than to argue further. She had been brought up to be obedient. Dressed in her Sunday clothes—it was considered essential to have an outfit which was worn as a rule only on one day of the week—she was taken on the Saturday by her mother to the kitchen entrance where the kitchenmaid, her mother's friend, informed them that Jessica was to be presented at the front door, "being as the little uns be the master's guests, so we been told."

This flummoxed Jessica's mother, who, in all her years of "helping out," had never approached the august front entrance, so, as soon as the clanging bell had been answered, she gave her daughter a pat on the shoulder, ordered her to "be a good girl and don't give no trouble to nobody," and turned tail.

There were other children in the hall. A maid counted them; more were admitted; she counted them again,

collected their cards to make sure there were no gate-crashers, and then led them along what seemed to Jessica an endless corridor. It ended at last at an ante-room where the children were told to leave their hats and coats. Bored and supercilious, the maid then straightened the girls' hair-ribbons and inspected the boys' fingernails and then took the group who, school-fashion, had automatically formed up in twos, back along one corridor into another one and halted them at an imposing double door.

The room into which she ushered them appeared to hold dozens of grown-up people. One of them, a tall young man, came forward with a smile.

"Hullo," he said. "Welcome to my birthday party. Well, I expect you're ready for your tea." The squire's wife came forward and stood beside him.

"Now you are going to sing Mr. Ronald your birthday song, aren't you?" she said. "Little Tommy Tucker sang for his supper, didn't he?—and you would like to do the same for your tea."

The little boys shuffled their feet; some of the little girls giggled nervously, but the squire's wife was standing no nonsense and (words by the vicar, music from the carol "Good King Wenceslas") the song which had been practised at every singing lesson for the past three weeks was rendered and received applause. There was a slightly belated "Bravo!" from the squire, and then the supercilious maid, who had stood with her back to the door, presumably in case the children should decide to stampede, took the group to a room even larger than the one in which they had rendered the birthday song.

The room had been cleared of furniture, which had been replaced by trestle tables with attendant backless benches. Presiding in the majesty of black silk dress, small lace cap, and festoons of gold chains was the housekeeper. She was attended by two maidservants.

“Sit down nicely,” she said in a repressive tone. The boys made a sheepish bee-line for one table, the girls thankfully went to another, but this did not do. “Oh, no!” said the housekeeper, waiting until all were settled. “We don’t show our bad manners like that! We try to behave like little ladies and gentlemen!” She then rearranged them, boy, girl, boy, girl, and commanded the biggest girl (as being more likely to comply with instructions than the biggest boy) to say grace. Then she retreated with regal dignity to her own quarters, leaving the two young maidservants to cope. The maid who had shepherded the children had long since made her escape, feeling that she had been “put upon” long enough for one afternoon.

The tea was stodgy on the whole, but the provision of thick bread spread with jam, dough-cake, buns, and sweet biscuits, followed by jellies and blancmange and custard tarts, served to curb, in the end, even the keenest appetites. There was even food left over.

When every child had eaten all it could and what remained of the jelly and blancmange was being flicked on teaspoons across the tables, and the servants were fighting to collect up plates and mugs, half a dozen young men, led by the son of the house, came in to romp with the children. Tables and benches were cleared away and soon what Kipling has called “a mêlée of a sumptuous kind” was in full swing.

The young men, swarmed over by full-fed, now completely uninhibited, yelling, screaming children, soon had had enough. They shook free of flailing arms and hobnailed boots and retired to put arnica on their bruises and get their breath back before preparing for dinner and the ball which was to follow.

The housekeeper, fortified by sherry and cake, was sent back to re-establish law and order, and some traditional party games were played. Unfortunately for Jessica, three mugsful of lemonade, the initial apprehension, the

excitement which had followed the meal, and the amount of sheer physical energy she had expended, combined to induce in her a desperate realisation that she had to find a lavatory and that right soon.

A game of Twos and Threes was in progress, so, when it was her turn to dart away, she planted herself in front of one of the bigger girls, turned her head, and muttered, "D'you know where it is? I want to go."

"No. Ask the old girl."

"I don't like to."

She held on until the game broke up and another was being arranged, then she glanced round, saw that nobody was looking her way, and quickly slipped out of a door at the side of the room. To use the double doors by which the children had entered would attract instant notice, she thought.

She found herself in the hall and at the foot of the grand staircase. It did not occur to her to mount it in search of what she so desperately needed. At home the privy was at the bottom of the garden beyond the wash-house and the woodshed and bounded by the bumby-hole. She looked this way and that, hoping that the corridor in which she found herself would lead to the kitchen where her mother would be still at work. The trouble was that she had no idea whether to turn right or left and every moment she was feeling more and more uncomfortable and more and more in terror of having to disgrace herself by wetting her knickers.

At this juncture heaven took a hand. Down the stairs came what to outward appearance was a young lady, one of the guests invited by the squire's son, but to Jessica she seemed to be an angel of mercy charged from on high to save a seven-year-old from humiliation and despair.

"Hullo," she said. "Aren't you enjoying yourself? Why aren't you with the rest of them? Are you playing Postman's Knock?"

Jessica began to cry.

"I be in a fair taken," she said. "I wants to go."

"You—? Oh, yes, of course! Come on. I'll show you." She ran lightly up the stairs and Jessica followed. "In there." She pointed to a door which was ajar.

Jessica found herself in a large bathroom. She had never seen such a room before. Besides the convenience for which she had such dire need, there was a bath with gleaming taps, a washbasin, spotless towels on a long rail, a bathroom stool and a chair, and a white-painted bathroom cabinet with a mirror front. There was a full-length wall-mirror, a patterned bath-mat, and flowered curtains to the window.

Having relieved herself, she saw that in the wall opposite the bath was a door. This, like the one by which Jessica had entered, was ajar. She peeped out on to the landing, but nobody was about, so she went to the communicating door which she had noticed and which had aroused her curiosity, listened and heard no sound, pushed it open, and looked in.

Awed, she found herself on the threshold of a luxurious bedroom. The mantelpiece was opposite the door and on it, with all their sinister charm, were two greenstone figures which, in spite of their eagle heads and curved beaks, she took to be dragons.

Much later on, she learned that they were representations of the fabulous animals called griffins, that they were copies of the black basalt ornaments made by Josiah Wedgwood in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and that Wedgwood himself had derived his inspiration to create them from the Delphic sphinx made of Naxian marble which had a human head instead of an eagle's beak.

Wedgwood's griffins, like the sphinx, had the bodies of seated lions, upswept wings, and crowns on their eagle heads. The crowns terminated in brass candle-holders, but, when she saw them across the width of that magnificent

bedroom, the child felt sure that the highly polished brass was pure gold.

As she was staring through the half-open doorway and registering the details of the fabulous monsters, she heard voices. Hastily she retreated to the bathroom door, opened it, and fled down the stairs. Thankfully and now physically at ease, she slipped back into the room where the other children, under the housekeeper's dominant eye, were playing a rather static singing game called Poor Jenny is a-Weeping, and inserted herself into the circle.

The housekeeper, however, had spotted her. She took her by the sleeve and led her away from the others.

"Where have *you* been?" she demanded. Jessica whispered a reply. "Oh? I hope you pulled the chain."

"Yes," said Jessica, who, not having any idea of what the chain was for, had not dared to touch it.

"As long as you haven't been wandering around. You should have asked me where to go." The games continued for half an hour, during which others, bolder and more uninhibited than Jessica, had demanded that their needs should be attended to. A maid was sent off with the girls, a footman summoned for the boys, and soon the party was over and parents, waiting in the kitchen, collected their offspring and took them out by way of the scullery, for the front door was now out of bounds except for the squire's family and their house-guests.

Jessica's mother was still busy, but her father was there to take her home. She did not see a great deal of him in the ordinary course of events. She was eating her sandwiches or her meat turnover in the school playground or, if it was wet or very cold, in the school lobby when he came home for his midday meal, and his hours of work in the squire's gardens and greenhouses were long ones, so she had little time with him in the evenings.

He asked her how she had enjoyed herself at the party, and received a muted answer, for she had not really

enjoyed herself at all. She told him, however, about the griffins, although not where she had seen them. She referred to them as dragons.

"Must be they things as set dinen-table alight one evenen," he said. "I wonder at squire keepen 'em after what happened. There was some larky goens-on, from what I year'd, and one on 'em got knocked over when the candles was lit. Then, later on, the old summerhouse was brent out and one of the ladies got suffocated. Anyway, you be too young to hear them sort of tales, I doubt, so don't you go tellen your mam or your auntie as I told 'ee of it. I reckon them heathen things be onlucky, whoever own 'em."

"Didn't they get brent in the fire like the lady?"

"Now you just forget all about 'em. Where did 'ee say 'ee see 'em?"

"In one of the rooms up some stairs."

"What did they give 'ee for tea? A good spread, was it? I be in hopes as 'ee never snabbed at nothen. T'ent manners."

This change of subject took Jessica's mind away from the griffins for the time being, although she was a little hurt that her father could suppose that she would ever snatch at food, however tempting it might be. But her thoughts returned to the griffins as soon as she got to bed. She realised why she could never think of them without fear. She could see in retrospect their cruel beaks, their arrogant lion-bodies, the upsurge of their proud, self-confident wings. They seemed to her the essence of evil, especially now she knew that they had killed. Their dragon breath had caused two fires and someone had died in one of them.

Jessica was afraid of fire and had some reason for her fear. The old lady in the adjoining cottage—the two dwellings were semi-detached—had lighted a bonfire one day while her husband was out. There had been a strong wind blowing and Jessica's mother, seeing and smelling the smoke, had hastened next door to protest. She had been

rudely told to mind her own business and just as she got back to her own garden a flaming bit of rubbish landed on the woodshed roof.

Jessica never forgot the next few minutes. Fortunately the woodshed roof was not thatched, but part of the guttering caught fire and her mother had to rush to the pump in the wash-house, fill buckets of water, and fling the water up at the flames, while Jessica wailed and the old woman came round and helped by doing the pumping. Between them they put out the fire, but she and Mrs. Denefield had never spoken to one another again.

So, after the squire's party, Jessica lay on her mattress on the floor of the room in which apples were stored in their season (for the cottage garden was a long one and grew apples, plums, gooseberries, and red and black currants, few flowers but all the vegetables the small family of three could eat), and as long as she stayed awake she thought about the griffins.

By one of those coincidences which occur so often when one's thoughts are centred on a particular subject, on the Monday afternoon following the squire's party, the teacher told Jessica's class the story of St. George and the dragon. For a village school, the building was a large one. The infants had their own schoolroom, the older children were in what was known as Big School, but the seven to nines had the only separate classroom and so could enjoy a privacy which was denied to the others and greatly appreciated by the teacher, who made her own timetable and did pretty much as she pleased. The last lesson on Mondays and Fridays for Jessica's class was called Storytime, and was very popular. Sometimes the teacher told the story, sometimes a volunteer was called for from among the children to describe the weekend spent at home.

The second half of the morning session that Monday had been spent by the class on a written exercise called "The Party at the Hall and How I Enjoyed It," a subject for

composition which would have provoked groans and protests from a less well-disciplined class. Jessica whispered to the girl with whom she shared a desk of the old-fashioned kind, which had a tip-up top with an inkwell sunk in it and a narrow tip-up form to seat two pupils, "I never enjoyed it. Did you?"

"No talking! What did you say to Jenny, Jessica?" (Jenny did not count as a diminutive because the child had been christened under that name, as the baptismal register could prove.)

"Please, miss, I only said as the party was lovely."

"Well, put that in your composition, and don't talk to the next girl. And as a hint to everybody, some of you may have seen something up at the Hall which you would like to have taken home with you. You may say so in your composition and give me a good description of it. I am not so lucky as you. I have never been inside that lovely big house. I expect it has lots of treasures."

Jessica wrote her essay with more imagination than truth, but did not mention the griffins. She had a feeling that they would not like her to do so. They had killed a lady who must have offended them in some way. Jessica had no intention of turning their ire against herself.

Nobody was more astonished and alarmed than she, therefore, when, at the time of the afternoon Storytime lesson, the teacher told the class about St. George and the dragon.

The class was interested in the story—especially the little boys and Jessica; they because they could identify with the brave saint; she because she was more convinced than ever that her two greenstone dragons were the epitome of evil and that all her superstitions concerning them were fully justified.

3

Tragedy and an Inquest

For some weeks after the squire's party, Jessica never left the cottage to walk to school without looking towards the Hall to see whether it was still standing and had not been burned down during the night. She felt that she knew why the squire kept the griffins (she still called them dragons) next door to the bathroom. There had to be plenty of water handy, in case they breathed out fire.

At about that time she won her first prize at school. It was awarded, as were the other prizes, by the squire's wife and was a Bible. There was already a Bible at the cottage, but it was seldom opened. It was an enormous tome and had a small table all to itself in the sitting-room. Inside its front cover were inscribed the names of her father's parents, his own name and date of birth and those of his brothers and sisters, the dates of his parents' deaths, the date of his marriage and the maiden name of his wife and her birthday, and the date of Jessica's birth.

When she took her prize home her mother said, "You better read a vess or two every Sunday. Better the day, better the deed, eh?"

"We have scripture every morning at school," said Jessica. "It ent very interesten." However, there was satisfaction in possessing a book of her own and she began to find that there were many pages in it which were very interesting indeed, but which the teachers and the vicar,

who came once a week to give a lesson called Prayer Book, seemed never to have heard of. Her favourite chapters by far were those contained in the Revelation of St. John the Divine. Here she found matters more weird and wonderful than anything she had heard in the stories told by teacher or that were to be found in the reading books used in school. Far from keeping her Bible for Sunday reading only, Jessica studied it diligently on most weekdays, too.

There were the magical names of the seven churches. She could not pronounce all of them and she had no idea that they had geographical locations. To her, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were islands, like Patmos itself, each guarded by a fearsome dragon.

Once, she said to her mother, "Teacher says everything in the Bible be true."

"Yes, of course it be."

"Squire's only got two lamps of gold. It says seven in the Bible."

"Then seven's right," said her mother, flicking water on to the garment she was ironing.

"Where would t'other five be?"

"How should I know? Put the Bible away and lay the table and do 'ee look sprack about it."

So the squire must have stolen the dragon candlesticks from two of the magic islands, Jessica decided, and some day there would have to be restitution or dire punishment. With this conclusion firmly fixed in her mind, she was probably the only person in the neighbourhood not to be shocked or surprised by the tragedy, when the squire's only son, the heir to the estate, was shot dead.

The Denefields had a personal interest in the matter and Jessica, pretending to be absorbed with her own affairs, heard a great deal about the inquest which was held. There was much that she did not understand, but her imagination filled in the blanks so that, rightly or wrongly, she obtained

a picture of what must have happened. The death had taken place in the kitchen garden at the Hall; her father had been working there at the time and had been called as a witness at the inquest.

The verdict was of accidental death, but Jessica knew that somehow or other the dragons had had a hand in it. The squire was being punished for stealing them from their magic islands, although it was his son who had been killed.

That piece of seeming injustice, however, was easily accounted for. The Bible had a word for it. The sins of the fathers would be visited upon the children. It was the squire, not the unfortunate young man who had fired the shot, who was responsible for Mr. Ronald's death. The dragons had breathed out the fire of their vengeance and in that fire the squire's heir had died, just as a woman had died by fire all those years earlier and for the same reason. The theft of the golden lamps was avenged.

"I knowed as it would happen," Jessica said to her mother.

"Knowed what 'ud happen?"

"About Mr. Ronald."

"Don't talk branten! How could 'ee know? And look, now! Don't you go sayen things like that to nobody else. Do you year me? There's bin enough niggles-naggles goen around without you starten. You ent to listen when me and our dad be talken. That ent talk for little childern."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so. It wasn't our dad's fault as he had to speak up to crowner the way he did. Anyway, crowner brought it in as accident, so that's what it was and that's what's gone down in the book."

"What book?"

"A book as is kept by the Law. Now you just get them dirty boots off and give 'em a bit of a clean, ready for school in the mornen."

The outline of the tragic story was simple and was understood even by a child. Despite her parents' reluctance to talk about it, Jessica managed to discover most of the facts. Two young men and a girl were involved. The butler, who gave his evidence in a way which indicated that he was anything but happy about the circumstances in which he found himself, was obliged to tell the first part of the story, although he was not the first witness to be called.

On the evening preceding the death, the two young gentlemen, Mr. Ronald and Mr. Stone, had been, well, no, (in answer to a question), he would not say drunk, but perhaps a bit over-excited and a lady's name had been, well, no, not bandied—he would not go as far as that—but, anyway, mentioned. Then the butler had heard Mr. Stone call Mr. Ronald by an opprobrious name and a bout of fisticuffs had ensued, during which Mr. Ronald had given Mr. Stone a nasty black eye and steak had been asked for which he, the butler, had personally applied to Mr. Stone's eye.

Mr. Stone, however, seemed to take the matter light-heartedly and only said to Mr. Ronald that he would "pay you out for this shiner, you see if I don't."

The coroner asked what interpretation the butler had put upon these words, but the answer was that young gentlemen would be young gentlemen and that he had thought nothing of the words at all, especially as Mr. Stone had "said it with a grin on his face."

The story, up to this point, was clear enough. There had been a quarrel followed by a fight. There had been a black eye. Steak had been put on it. "What a waste of lovely meat," her mother had said. "I never sees steak except in the kitchen up at the Hall, and then that ent for the likes of us."

What Jessica could not gather from hearsay was the appearance and demeanour of the young man who had fired the shot. The only description her father had ever given of him in her hearing was that "except for his shiner,

which certainly was a beauty, his face was as white as boiled rice pudding."

Jessica had to invent the rest and the invention became more romantic and more detailed as she grew older. By the time she was thirteen, she had a complete picture of Mr. Stone in the witness-box: tousle-haired, wild-eyed (she had eliminated the "shiner" in the interests of aesthetics), nervous, and grief-stricken, his hands clutching the edge of the witness-box, his voice almost inaudible.

As for his evidence, she remembered parts of it from her parents' conversations and made up the rest in order to include one of the griffins, for those had to be brought into the picture somehow and she soon worked out how this could be done.

"Will you tell the court exactly what happened, Mr. Stone?"

"I can't bring myself—it was terrible! I'm too shocked to talk about it. He was my best friend and I—and I—"

"We quite understand. Just take your time. All we want is for you to tell the court what you saw, heard, and did. Use your own words and if you would just speak up a little, please? The jury and I must be able to hear what you have to say."

"Oh, sorry! Well, it was one of those mornings, breakfast over, lunch a long way off, nothing much to do, hunting fixed for the next day, but meanwhile all of that day before us, so when Ronnie suggested this shooting practice I was all for it."

"The shooting match was Mr. Ronald Havant's idea, was it?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely. It would have to be. I mean, I hadn't been invited to shoot, only to visit and be lent a mount, so I hadn't brought my guns, so the suggestion naturally had to come from Ronnie. But it wasn't a shooting match. There was no competition, no rivalry, I mean. It was just target practice."

"No rivalry, when you were being watched by a young lady? I understand a young lady was present."

"Oh, Stephanie wasn't interested. She stayed barely five minutes to watch. She wanted to have a go, but Ronnie said the gun kicked too much and might put her shoulder out, so then she wandered off and a bit later she went through a door in the kitchen-garden wall. The gardener chap had left it open, so I suppose she thought she might as well see what was on the other side of it."

"What kind of target did you use?"

"Target? Oh, rather unique, actually," Jessica seemed to hear Stone saying, "only, of course, the thing itself wasn't the target. It was only, so to speak, the target-holder, but Ronnie said his father wouldn't mind if one of us made a boss shot and damaged the thing, because there was a hoodoo on it, anyway." (This was all part of Jessica's romantic reconstruction. This was where the griffins had to come in.)

"So what was this target-holder?"

"Actually a stone ornament, sort of, a thing about a foot high in the form of some fabulous beast or other. It had an eagle's head and a lion's body and it had wings and the top of the head—well, *on* top of the head—was a kind of crown ending with a candlestick sort of thing. Ronnie put a candle in the candlestick and then attached a postcard to the candle with a drawing-pin and then he measured out twenty paces and put down a walking-stick to mark the distance, and then we put our initials on the rest of the postcards. There was a whole packet of postcards. We took half each and wrote our initials on them and then the number of shots we'd put on them after we'd fired, and the other chap initialled it to say he agreed."

"I thought you said it was not a competition."

"Well, no, it wasn't, but naturally we had some money on it. Stephanie (the name was Jessica's invention) watched my first six shots and then Ronnie's and then she got bored,

I suppose, as she wasn't taking part and she sulked a bit." (*Did* young ladies of wealth and social status sulk, Jessica wondered, or was sulking an exhibition of bad manners and childishness reserved for the lower classes?)

"She was not pleased at being kept out of your pastime?"

"That was it. She walked over to the door in the garden wall which the gardener chap had left open and we forgot all about her and went on shooting, six shots to me and six to Ronnie, and put down the scores on the postcards."

"Where did each of you stand while the other was shooting?"

"Stand? Oh, I don't know. Here and there. Well, after a bit, Stephanie called out that she still wanted to have a go, although Ronnie had said not. He ran across to reason with her. I must have had my finger on the trigger because—O God! I didn't mean to do it—"

Jessica almost wept as she told herself, time and again, the story, but she was certain that the coroner's voice was calm. She saw him as a kindly man concerned with Stone's obvious distress.

"How high had Mr. Havant fixed the target?" This was a crucial question for Jessica and she had invented it because she felt that it needed an answer. Mr. Ronald had been shot in the head. If his head had been on a level with the target, she reasoned (this in her later years), the verdict of accidental death was justifiable, but if the target had been lower than that? Her fantasies left the answer to the youth in the witness-box.

"Well, it was a bit higher than we really wanted it. There was a sawn-off tree about half-way down the garden (her father had mentioned this), and Ronnie thought we could pin the target to that, but the bark had been peeled off and the drawing-pin wouldn't go into the hard wood, so Ronnie went off to the house and came back with this stone thing

and a candle. If only he hadn't! Then I would only have got him in the shoulder!"

"A candle? Oh, yes, you mentioned that."

"The thing was a glorified candlestick and made of stone, so Ronnie pinned a postcard to the candle because the pin wouldn't go in anywhere else, and that made the target quite a bit higher than we'd intended. Except for that—except for that—oh, why did the silly fool have to streak across my line of fire?"

The target—Jessica had it all worked out—must have been head-high to Mr. Ronald, then. He had been shot in the head. Everybody knew that. The next part of the story was authentic and not the product of Jessica's imagination, for her father was the next witness and had told his wife more than once about his appearance in the witness-box. He was proud of it and had been treated at the public house in return for his story.

"And afore crowner could put me through my paces, I up and told him straight. 'I can't see Mr. Ronald doen anythen so foolish as to run acrorst a gentleman as must have been taken aim,' I says." He had been working in the kitchen garden when Mr. Ronald, with a young lady and another young gentleman, had come along and bid him go and work some place else, as they wanted the middle of the kitchen garden for target practice. He had gone through into the walled garden and "done a bit of tidying up to the apricot espaliers," leaving the door in the wall open.

"Why did you do that?" asked the coroner.

"Mr. Ronald said he 'ud call to me as soon as they finished their shooten, so I could get back to my work, as I was under orders from the head gardener to cut down the sparragrass stems afore the seeds dropped."

"I see. Go on, Denefield."

"I left the door open and I reckon that was what give the young lady the idea to come through and watch me at work. She asked me what kind of fruit was growed on me

espaliers, so I tells her and we talks. Then she wanders off for a bit and the next thing I hears is she calls out to Mr. Ronald.”

Jessica had no difficulty in visualising the scene which must have followed. She realised that there had been nobody to check Stone’s story. The girl and the gardener had not been eye-witnesses of the shooting. They merely saw the fatal result of it. Her father, she knew, had been sent post-haste back to the house to report the accident and a doctor had been sent for, while a white-faced boy and a sobbing girl had knelt beside the dead youth. That part was factual, she knew.

The girl had been much too shocked and ill to be called as a witness at the inquest and her evidence would have been of as little value as that of Jessica’s father, and only a repetition of it. What had struck Jessica most forcibly was her father’s conviction of how unlikely it was that a young man accustomed to firearms should have done anything so foolish as to dash across in front of a target when he must have known that a marksman was taking aim. The squire, she decided, had had some grounds for suspecting that his son had been murdered. She wondered whether he and her father would ever be proved right. It was an intriguing thought. She gave much of her mind to it. The story was romantic in the extreme. There was the drunken quarrel of the night before, the fight, the black eye, the threat overheard by the butler, and its dreadful fulfilment in the kitchen garden.

Yet the shooting practice had been Ronald’s idea, not Stone’s. Would he have trusted his companion with a lethal weapon if the overnight quarrel had not been resolved?

“Did father ever pass any other opinion about what happened?” she asked her mother during one of their many discussions of the matter after Jessica was grown up.

“Nothen as mattered, and so he never mentioned it in court. When Mr. Ronald said as the gun was too fierce for a

young lady, she must have walked off for a bit, because Mr. Ronald asked her if she wasn't goen to stay and watch the shooten. Seemenly she didn't have nothen to say to that, but, any road, she ji'ned our dad, a bit later on, in the walled garden, then wandered off somewhere else. Next thing our dad yeard was her call to Mr. Ronald, like he told crowner."

"I suppose she went indoors in a huff and then thought better of it."

"Not knowen, can't say. 'Twudn't have made no difference to what happened."

On the day of the funeral the school had been mustered in the playground and marched to the church for the service, although nobody but the squire, his wife, and a few close friends were to be present at the actual interment in the family vault.

The schoolchildren were given places in the pews beyond the north aisle and the villagers—mostly women and elderly men, since the breadwinners, unless they were employed by the squire, could not afford to lose pay by taking time off from work—sat behind the children and the teachers. The pews beyond the south aisle were occupied by the squire's indoor and outdoor servants and the seats in the centre of the church were for the squire and his party. This included an impressive number of his business associates and their wives—people whom the village had seldom seen before.

After the vicar had preceded the coffin and had intoned the sentences from St. John, Job, and St. Timothy, the choir, which included a dozen of the village boys (one reason why the school had been closed for the day) sang the Ninetieth Psalm. The lesson was read and a hymn sung. During the hymn the schoolchildren were quietly ushered out and the rest of the day was a holiday for them.

Jessica's mother slipped out, too, as did other women who had a midday meal to prepare, and she and Jessica walked the two miles home together.

"The servants and gardeners and grooms and all will set down to a dinner up at the Hall, so I ent to expect our dad 'til evenen. Wasn't the flowers lovely?"

"Did *he* come to the church?" asked Jessica.

"He? What *he*? Oh, *him*! I shouldn't think he'd dorstan to show his face, not after what he done to poor Mr. Ronald."

But Jessica knew better, although she did not voice her conviction. It was not Mr. Stone who had killed Mr. Ronald; it was the dragons.

"There's got to be three, I s'pose," she said.

"Dree? Dree what?"

"I dunno. Teacher said misfortunes always comes in threes."

"Maybe teacher's right, at that, but what dree be 'ee a-bletheren about?"

"Our dad said as a young lady was brent to death up at the Hall when the old summerhouse cotched fire."

"He'd no right to tell 'ee about such things. You just forget all about it. Any road, it was long afore our time and I reckon as it's one of them tales as hasn't lost nothen in the tellen. It wasn't a *young* lady, the way I yeard it. It was an *old* lady as had bin sleepen in the summerhouse of a very warm arternoon and Mr. Ronnie was on'y a little boy at the time. I reckon he got larken about—"

"With they candles?"

"Candles? They ent like to us, up to the Hall. They got gas laid on."

"Got candles, too. I seen 'em when I went there for the party. Our dad said as how 'em once set the dinen-room a-fire."

"Oh, that! 'Twadn't nothen. Tablecloth got brent, that be all. Summerhouse business was real bad, though, on account of Master Ronald be-en a naughty boy and playen around wi' a box of matches. I reckon he run boris-noris all about when he see what he done, so the old lady got suffocated afore help come, but I don't know nothen else. It

were afore our time, and you don't want to think about such matters at your age."

4

The Griffins Again

At Christmas time the squire's wife died—killed, it was said, by grief and shock—and soon after her ninth birthday Jessica's small world fell apart, for the squire announced to his staff that he was selling up and going to live in the south of France.

He gave favourable references to each of his servants and a present of money. Jessica's mother received the news with dismay, and the money with a sniff of contempt and the remark, "That baint goen to take us far, be it?"

But Denefield had an iron in the fire which she had never suspected. He said, "I asked squire for a job in his town business. I can read and I writes a fair hand and figures never didn't come amiss to me, so he give me a recommendation, like, and I'm to see the office boss in London and, if I gets the job and can find somewhere to live, I'll send for you and the young 'un."

"To live in London?"

"Ah. Well, 'tain't actual London, more a town outside along the river. Squire was pleased with the way I give my evidence at inquest, I reckon, sayen I didn't believe Mr. Ronald 'ud be so foolish. He didn't make no bones about writen the letter as I got to hand over when I gets to the office. He set down and writ it straight off."

"What do it say?"

“How should I know? ’Tis all stuck down. That’s for them up there to read, not for the likes of us.”

Like most schoolchildren, Jessica had three languages. One was for classroom use, where she had learned to speak grammatically although nothing had been done about her broad country accent, another was for the playground, and the third was in the vernacular of her home. She had done well at school and the head teacher was gracious when Mrs. Denefield went to the school to announce that Jessica would be leaving. She said that they would be sorry to lose the child.

Mrs. Denefield and Jessica had heard that Denefield had found a flat over a haberdasher’s shop and had bought himself a second-hand bicycle, as the flat was a long way from the office in which he had been given a lowly position—not much above that of office boy, but with promises of promotion if he proved to be reliable and efficient. They joined him a week later.

The rent of the flat was small, but it made a considerable inroad into his wages, so he decided to look for weekend gardening jobs “to help out,” as he expressed it. He was a skilled gardener and, as it was now autumn, there was plenty of clearing up to be done in the gardens of large residences in the northern part of the town in which the family had come to live. He gradually built up a clientele and was glad of the extra money.

Jessica was sent to attend a school only a couple of streets away from her new home, but hardly had time to settle in before the family moved again. This was to a three-storey house with a basement. It was much nearer her father’s work, but out of the catchment area of Jessica’s school. Denefield had received an offer from another clerk who found the house too large for his wife to cope with and was anxious to find somebody to share the housework and help with the rent. It was possible for the two families to afford such a large residence because it was sideways on to

a noisy railway goods yard and more affluent people would not take it on, so the rent had been lowered considerably in an effort to let it.

The new home meant joy to Jessica as well as a new school. The flat over the shop had had nothing but a small, square, plantless back yard, but the new house had a very long back garden, a well-laid lawn, and flowerbeds which the other clerk claimed, but the lower half of the garden had a huge oak tree which Jessica could climb and a walnut tree which fruited in abundance.

The snag, from Mrs. Denefield's point of view, was the shared kitchen and scullery, but the two wives got along together reasonably well and Jessica took to her new school with enthusiasm. The teachers considered her a very promising pupil and when she was ten the headmistress sent for her and told her to ask her mother to come up to the school for a talk.

"I hope it don't mean as you're in trouble," said Mrs. Denefield apprehensively.

"No, mum. I think it's about the scholarship."

"What scholarship?"

"I don't know, but there's an Honours Board in the corridor with names on it of girls who've won free places."

"Free places in what?"

"I don't know."

So Mrs. Denefield visited the school and the day came when Jessica, having sat a written test in composition, grammar, and arithmetic and having read aloud to the examiner from Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and answered viva voce questions about her favourite books, received the accolade of a free place at the nearest County Secondary School for Girls.

The reading from Dickens had brought back memories to Jessica of the uncle who had taught her to read and to swim. The uncle had also moved house. When the Hall was to be sold, he had applied to the squire for the address of a

young man who had not only enjoyed the fishing at Longwater Sedge, but several times had bought the uncle's artificial flies for trout fishing on other rivers. He was the son of a wealthy father who was a member of a syndicate of equally wealthy fly-fishermen. They had a stretch of water in Hampshire and Jessica's uncle became river-keeper to the syndicate.

The departure of himself and her aunt had done much to console Jessica for her own uprooting, for at first she missed the village school, the river, and the mill. She had enjoyed her year or two at the school from which she had won her free place, but at the County Secondary School she was a fish out of water at first, for, although the fees for what she called "the paying girls" were only two guineas a term and half a crown for games equipment, the amount of snobbery shown towards the despised "scholarship girls" would be almost inconceivable to modern minds.

Jessica was unhappy at first, but she was bright and keen, which pleased the mistresses; well behaved, which pleased the head; and good at games and swimming, which, in the end, brought her the respect and even the liking of her contemporaries, especially of her fellow team-mates—so, after a time, she settled down well.

She began to be groomed for Matriculation and there were the Saturday morning hockey matches (which got her out of helping with the housework at home), and a small bursary of fifteen pounds a year when her father signed a form agreeing to keep her at school as an intending teacher until she was seventeen.

Having lived outside the village, the Denefields had no close friends in Longwater Sedge now that the uncle and aunt had left it and they never went back to it as a family, although Jessica was to visit it in later life. For long periods she even forgot the griffins. She learned to call them by their proper name after the English mistress had corrected one of her essays. At the end of it the teacher had written:

Well expressed and shows imagination. The creatures you describe are not dragons, but gryphons, sometimes spelled "griffins."

Jessica asked what the difference was between a dragon and a griffin.

"A dragon has jaws and teeth and the body of a reptile. A gryphon has an eagle's head and the body of a lion. Both have wings, but that is almost the only point of resemblance between them, except that both are fabulous creatures and have never existed in nature. Did you never read *Alice in Wonderland*?"

"At my other school they began to read it to us, but I left before we got very far into it."

"A griffin or gryphon is illustrated by Tenniel. I will bring my copy to school and show you the picture."

So, with English, French, and games, good reports and, in the end, an established position among her peers, Jessica flourished at school, took her Matriculation, and passed with credit. At the age of seventeen and a half she had to put in a year as a student teacher at a local elementary school. This brought her parents forty pounds, which they saved towards her college outfit.

After a year in which, although she encountered difficulties, she was convinced that she was entering the right profession, she went to a training college and at the end of her second year there she obtained a certificate and applied for her first post.

Denefield had done well. He had been promoted more than once at the office, but he kept on his occasional gardening jobs, saved money, and talked of putting down a deposit on a house of his own. The family had long since given up sharing a home with the clerk and had moved to another rented property of which they were the sole tenants.

The reason for the change was an uncomplicated one. Mrs. Denefield and her opposite number, a Mrs. Camelford,

remained on fairly easy terms with one another, for there was a certain amount of give and take between them with regard to the shared kitchen and scullery, but it became increasingly evident, as the months went by, that Camelford and his wife did not get on together at all. At first they were careful. The quarrels, although deep and bitter, were quiet, but, as time went on, the couple threw discretion to the winds and the acrimony grew more and more vociferous.

Mrs. Denefield said to her husband, "I can't stick it no longer. Us'll have to get out afore there's murder done. I ent goen to be called as a witness in court when he does for her and now they've taken to vi'lence that'll be the finish of it, I reckon."

Denefield, a peace-loving man, agreed.

"'Tent good for the young 'un, neether," he said, "to have to yer 'em at it. I had enough of law courts when I was called up by crowner."

Jessica was present when this conversation took place and was reminded of the griffins. She did not suppose that she would ever see or hear of them again, but unpredictably she did, although not until some time after she and her parents had moved house. When she had finished her course of training, Denefield decided that he could afford to take her and her mother for a week's holiday.

Because he knew of it from the days when he had lived at Longwater Sedge, he chose a clean little town called Olquay. There was a ferry service from it to the Isle of Wight and among its attractions were its broad main street which sloped downhill to the harbour, some attractive shops, and two charming old inns.

One of these was at the end of the main street and, once past it, there was a partly paved, partly cobblestoned way down to the quay. Denefield liked fishing and his wife preferred shop-window-gazing along the main street, so Jessica went off alone when she could. She was entranced by the quay, the fishing-boats, the swans which insisted

upon being fed, and the woman artist who sat there with her easel and palette and painted the harbour, the boats, and the swans.

To get down to the quay Jessica had to pass not only the inn but also one solitary little old shop. It sold antiques, picture frames, modern copies of famous paintings, and bric-a-brac of all kinds. Among the articles in the window were a pair of greenstone griffins. Jessica's heart missed a beat when she set eyes on them.

Whenever she passed the shop she stopped to look at them. She had no idea how the shopkeeper had come by them, but she supposed that when the contents of the Hall had been auctioned somebody had bought them and, later on, had disposed of them to the dealer in bric-a-brac. One evening she mentioned them to her father.

"There's a shop in the town with the squire's griffins in the window."

"Oh, ah? What be them, then? Griffins? Never heard tell of such things. Squire's, you say?"

"I used to think they were dragons. You know, those greenstone ornaments you told me about, those that burned down the summerhouse. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, they things! Squire sold 'em, then, along with the house and all. But they never brent down nothen. You ben dreamen."

"I wonder how much the man wants for them?"

"Too much, in a holiday place like this. Any road, I wouldn't give they things house-room."

"No, of course not. I only wondered how much they'd fetch."

"Where did 'ee see 'em?" asked her mother.

"In a little shop as you go down to the quay."

"If 'ee wants to be nosey, why don't 'ee go in and ask the price?" said her father. "Don't mean 'ee'll have to buy."

The next time Jessica saw them she was with her father, who was going to fish from the jetty. She stopped and

pointed them out.

"I'd like to know whether they are valuable," she said, "but I don't like to go in and ask, as I don't mean to buy. You wouldn't like to do it for me, would you, dad? Just out of curiosity, you know."

"No. I reckon they're unlucky. So that's what they look like, is it? If they come from the Hall, they'll fetch a good price, I don't doubt." He went onwards down the slope, but Jessica lingered. Then she went into the shop and bought a little jug in the local china for her mother.

"What's the price of those green things in the window?" she asked.

"The greenstone griffins? They're a trademark. Not for sale."

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "I only wondered, because I think they came from a house I knew when I was a little girl, the Hall at Longwater Sedge."

The shopkeeper shook his head.

"Means nothing to me," he said. He wrapped up the little jug, took her money, and turned to a customer who had just come in. She walked out but again lingered outside the window. She had never crossed to the opposite side of the narrow thoroughfare. Three concrete posts blocked traffic from entering it and opposite the solitary shop there was nothing but a long brick wall. She crossed over and for the first time noticed the caption above the wide, low front of the shop. The shopkeeper had spoken truly. He had adopted the ornamental candle-holders as his trademark. It read:

Comenopoulos. The Greenstone Griffins. Antiques.

Jessica walked on, her mind busy with the past.

"Perhaps I ought to have warned him that they are unlucky," she thought, all her childhood superstitions coming back to her. On the following morning, the last day

of her holiday, she visited the shop again. The window was empty of goods; the griffins, as well as all the other exhibits, had gone.

She peered in at the glass-topped door and then tried it. It was locked. That night as she lay in bed she heard the fire-engine go shouting by, with all its warning bells jangling. She felt she knew whither it was bound and she was right. She went to the shop as soon as she had had her breakfast, for the Denefields were not leaving until after lunch. The alleyway was still running with water. The shop had been gutted by fire.

"I wonder what happened?" she said to her father on her return to the holiday lodgings. Denefield, no longer the simple countryman, replied, "Insurance racket, I don't doubt. 'Tis allus be-en tried on."

"I don't suppose we'll ever see the griffins again," said Jessica, but, as she said the words, Jessica knew that she did not mean them. Creatures so fantastically capable of evil were not disposed of so easily.

The following autumn Denefield stuck a gardening fork through his foot, the wound turned septic, and he refused to go to hospital. The result was blood-poisoning, of which he died.

Jessica, in the middle of her first school term as a teacher, received the news in a letter from her mother and got leave of absence for the funeral. When it was over she said, "Can you manage all right until I get us somewhere near my school?"

"Your auntie and uncle will have me for a bit and then, now you've got a job, maybe me and you can do what your dad wanted and have a place of our own. The company have been very good. They sent a wreath—you saw it, didn't 'ee?—roses and lilies, very tasteful and must have cost a bit—and another from his mates in the office. Makes 'ee feel

better, don't it, knowen as he was well thought of and respected. They wants me to go along and get a little present, as your dad never lived to take his pension. Will 'ee come along? I ent used to these grand people."

Before taking up her first post, Jessica had spent a fortnight with her uncle and aunt. They had a bigger and better cottage than the one at Longwater Sedge and from it there was a view of a broader, clearer river, but the riverside plants, the reeds and the willows, seemed the same as those she had known in her childhood and once again old memories came flooding back. She mentioned the griffins to her uncle, but it was clear he knew nothing about them.

Dimly and without admitting overtly to herself that she did so, she blamed them for her father's death, although, at the same time, she knew how utterly unreasonable this was. She even ventured to go back to Olquay and into the inn at the top of the alleyway to ask where the antiques dealer had gone, but all she got was a disapproving stare and a denial of all knowledge of Comenopoulos.

Enquiry at her local house-agents produced a much deeper disappointment. Even with the money her mother had received from the firm, Denefield's savings, and Jessica's salary, there was no way that the two of them could afford a mortgage on a house of their own.

5

A Kind of Window Shopping

Jessica's first post was at a school which was less than a quarter of a mile from the local swimming baths in a small dirty town called Willowford. As there were no playing fields available—the only open space being the property of the professional football club—swimming had become the main school sport and Jessica was in charge of it.

The school swimming gala had been an institution for many years before her appointment and there were two shops in the dingy high street which traditionally displayed in their windows the trophies and the prizes which were to be won.

One Friday afternoon Jessica found herself with half an hour of the school dinnertime to spare. Ordinarily she would have been holding a team swimming practice before going back to her digs for the lunch her landlady provided, but half a dozen of her squad were on an educational outing, so she had cancelled the practice and had strolled down to the high street.

The two shops which displayed the prizes were side by side and were kept by Old Boys of the school which occupied the top storey of the building in which Jessica taught. Abel Lushman was a jeweller and pawnbroker, so that the prizes displayed in his window consisted of such items as watches, clocks, silver-backed hairbrushes, silver-

topped glass vases, butter dishes, jam dishes, paper-knives, cases of cutlery, and silver-topped cruet sets.

Next door was the sports outfitters kept by Richard Shandy. Here displayed as prizes were cricket bats, tennis racquets, footballs, boxing gloves, running shoes and vests, football shirts and shorts, and swimming costumes. The time of bikinis, swim-trunks, snorkel tubes, and frogmen's flippers was not yet, but tracksuits were already in fashion and one was on display.

The prizes for boys and those for girls were in separate halves of each shop window and were clearly marked. Not only was the event specified for which each gift was to be competed and whether it was an award for first, second, or third place, but the name of the donor was also writ large upon it.

Jessica had been accustomed, both at the County Secondary School and at college, to accepting nothing but a badge or a bit of ribbon for any success in sport, so she was somewhat surprised and disapproving when she heard from her pupils of the prizes which were offered.

"You ought to go and have a look, miss. I got my eye on a silver-backed brush for meself and a jam dish for me mum."

"My dad wants me to get a clock if I can. Ours in the front room has gone bust and he don't want to pay old Lushman to have it mended, not if he can help it, miss."

There had always been trouble about the prizes, and the headmaster and headmistress had made more than one attempt to get rid of them, but received no support. It was a point of honour with the so-called "gentlemen of the town" to attempt to out-do one another in the number and desirability of the prizes they were prepared to pay for. Their names on their gifts in the two shop windows were valuable propaganda when it came to voting time at the council elections.

Among the young, gamesmanship (although the word had not been in use at the time) was rife. The boys and girls studied the exhibits and worked out whether a second prize of a wristwatch was not to be preferred to a first prize of a case of spoons, or whether a third prize of a table-tennis set was not more to be desired than a first prize of a clock which automatically would become the property of the whole family, or whether perhaps a longed-for second prize of a football shirt would not be commandeered immediately by an older brother, and therefore that a third prize of a junior-size cricket bat should be aimed at.

On one occasion, the uncle of the second fastest boy over two lengths of the twenty-five-yard swimming bath gave a bicycle, but, in order to make certain that his nephew would win it, he insisted upon its being offered as second, not first, prize. The first prize was a silver-plated biscuit barrel.

The race was a farce. The fastest boy kept just behind the second fastest boy; the second fastest boy, aware of the reason for the manoeuvre, deliberately slowed down and the third and fourth fastest boys galumphed past them like a couple of young whales and carried off the first and second prizes. It transpired that the awardee of the biscuit barrel was given a bicycle by his father who (rashly, as it turned out) had promised the bicycle if the lad beat the first of the more fancied swimmers, a feat which would have been impossible without the misguided co-operation of the champion.

Neither were the girls behindhand in this sort of skulduggery. In fact, true to the tradition that the female of the species is deadlier than the male (nobody ever attempts to add that this axiom originally referred only to spiders), the girls went one better than their brothers.

For each school a consolation prize was offered to the boy and girl who had entered for three or more events and had perhaps come about fourth in each and so just missed

an award, possibly only by a touch. It was not called by so derogatory a name as a consolation prize. It was the Special Effort Award and was usually of minor monetary value compared with the other prizes; it was always given by one of the gentlemen who had provided other and more valuable gifts for the first, second, and third placings.

One year, however, the Special Effort Award happened to be a towelling dressing-gown in the colours of a swimming club which recently the fastest girl in the school had joined. Knowing that her parents could not afford to give her such a garment, she set her heart on winning this one and, to this end, she entered for every event for which she was eligible (e.g., the Learners' Width and the Novices' Handicap obviously were out of it for her) and, using all her expertise, she came fourth in every race and perforce had to be awarded the consolation prize. There was sympathetic applause from the spectators and astonished gratitude from all of those prize-winners who did not know the facts, but no noticeable enthusiasm was displayed by the headmistress, who used the incident in one more abortive attempt to get all the prizes done away with. There was a staff meeting, but everybody knew that nothing would come of any protests. The education committee were all on the council.

Meanwhile, before her first experience of a gala, Jessica was killing time before walking back to get her lunch. She was seldom alone at the shop window. Groups, couples, and occasionally single spies joined her, priced up the articles on view, and even canvassed her views on their respective merits.

"Miss, do you reckon the second prize for the two lengths is better'n the first for diving, miss?"

"Miss, you got to go off the top board to win the diving, miss."

"Miss, before the prizes was on show, I seen the price of that clock for the back-stroke, miss. It was four pounds,

miss. Cor! I'd rather have four pounds than a mouldy old clock, wouldn't you, miss?"

"You could flog the clock back to old Sheeny Lushman if you winned it," said a boy, "but I bet he wouldn't give you four quid for it."

"Old Lushman never buys back. I tried last year with a dud watch," said another boy.

"Why don't they give us money prizes, miss? I could go to Sarfend if they give money. Why don't they?"

"You'd be professionals, and that would be the end of school swimming," said Jessica. She turned away from the shop window. Accepting the hint, her companions sped away. One did not walk the streets alongside a teacher. That was the action of a creep. Jessica was still in no hurry to go back to her lunch. It was fried fish and chips, and the smell of the offerings which had been bought by her landlady and kept hot in the oven on greaseproof kitchen paper always took away her appetite.

Having turned away from Abel Lushman's watches and silverware (more likely electroplate, thought Jessica), she glanced across the high street. Opposite Lushman's there was a grocer's shop. It and the greengrocer's next door had once formed an old coaching inn and on the first floor a deep bay window, like a small enclosed verandah, had been built out over the pavement below so that the passengers on top of the coaches could be served with short-stop refreshments without having to leave their seats.

Jessica had seen it before, but only as an interesting anachronism. Now, however, as she looked across the road, she had a sudden surprise and not, she realised, a pleasant one. Perched on either a small table or the window ledge inside the bay was a pair of greenstone griffins. An off-white curtain had been drawn across the bay, enclosing it, and against the curtain the griffins showed up clearly.

They were facing one another and were so close together that Jessica concluded that their rectangular bases

must be touching one another. They certainly had not been in the window on her last visit to the high street, she was certain, but that had been weeks ago when she was shopping for a birthday present for her mother.

She glanced at her watch and found she had no more time to spare, so she hurried back to her lunch and on to school. The afternoon session was divided into three periods, two before break and one after. She got through them somehow and then went back to the high street. There had been no hallucination, no mirage, no figment of her imagination. The griffins were still there, but they had abandoned their friendly attitude towards one another and were now back to back.

The curtain was still drawn across, excluding the built-out bay window from the rest of the room. All that occurred to Jessica, at the time, was that somebody had taken the trouble to dust the griffins and in doing so had changed their positions.

The next day, Saturday, had been set aside for a visit from her mother, so she did not go down to the griffins again. She wondered whether to mention them to her mother, but the talk turned on the possibility of their setting up house together if Jessica could find rooms or a flat to let when she received her next pay rise, and the subject of the griffins was shelved. When she went to the high street the next day she saw that the griffins were facing one another once more. Their quarrel (as her fanciful mind now suggested) must be over and their partnership renewed. However, reason soon asserted itself. The transposition of the ornaments was again easily explained. Once more the owner, in dusting them, had merely turned them around to face the other way. She found herself thinking of the junk-shop owner. She wondered whether the insurance company had paid up and whether Comenopoulos had started another business with the money. She concluded that this had not happened. The griffins had been his trademark. He

had refused to consider selling them. If he had set up another shop, he would not have parted with them. He must have been in dire straits (so thought the romantically minded young Jessica) to have sold them.

This brought her to speculating upon the kind of person who had bought them. The dingy grocer's shop and the off-white, probably soiled curtains above it, gave little impression of money to spare on expensive candle-holders. Probably the junk-shop merchant had been compelled to sell off his wares cheaply. He might even by now be serving a prison sentence for arson with attempt to defraud the insurance people.

The thought of arson took her back to her childhood fantasies. It was not the shopkeeper who had set fire to his emporium, but the griffins themselves. What was more, they had not even been in the shop when it was demolished by fire, any more (as she now realised) than they had been in the summerhouse at Longwater Hall or in the kitchen garden when Ronald Havant was shot. She shrugged off her fancies and concentrated her thoughts on the swimming gala.

With her spare time taken up with team practices, lifesaving lessons for keen beginners who were working towards taking their bronze medals, and all the careful seeding of competitors and the tickets and programmes for the gala to be made out and printed, she found her hands completely full and for a time all thoughts of the griffins slipped into limbo.

After the gala was over, however, she made a habit of hurrying down to the high street, as soon as her class was dismissed, to observe the griffins. Their antics continued. She kept notes on their activities. These activities seemed to conform to no established pattern. Their attraction for and their repudiation of one another were subject to no

rules, but seemed completely arbitrary. Sometimes they would go a whole week without changing position, but this was usually when they were back to back. Sometimes they changed daily, but it seemed to be at weekends that they were on the most friendly terms, spending Saturday and Sunday with their fiercely curved beaks towards one another and their mighty wings arched over as though they would fain be in contact.

One afternoon she met Shandy putting away his sun-blinds. She had never been in Lushman's shop, having no need of a pawnbroker and being unable to afford jewellery or silverware, but she had bought a couple of netballs from Shandy which he inflated when this was necessary and, with his strong male fingers, laced up for her, so, to that extent, the two of them were acquainted. She said to him, "Do you know who lives above that grocer's shop over the way? There are two ornaments in the bay window I'm interested in. I've got an idea they came from a village I used to know. Does the grocer live over the shop?"

"No, he don't. Got a house of his own back in the town," Shandy replied. He looked at her and then, turning aside, he added, "Lets the flat to a woman who, if you ask me, isn't any better than she should be. I could name you some people in this town as go down the side alley to visit her, but it don't do to know too much, so I'm saying nowt."

"You mean—" Light dawned on Jessica. "You mean those ornaments are a signal? You mean—"

"Look," said Shandy kindly, "you're not the kind of young lady to go mixing yourself up with her sort."

"Of course not. I was interested in the ornaments, that's all."

"You forget 'em, miss. My word, there's some wives in this town as would get some nasty surprises if they knowed who I've seen go down to that back yard."

Jessica herself was in for a surprise on the following Thursday afternoon, early-closing day. Jessica detested

Thursday afternoons at school. The double period before break was devoted to needlework, a subject which, even in her own schooldays, she had always disliked. Before she won her free place at the County Secondary School her mother had thought her too young to be trusted to work on material which had to be paid for. After that, what with homework and Saturday matches, Jessica herself had had little time and certainly no inclination to make anything except an occasional petticoat for herself. She had failed the subject at college and had almost missed a First Class teaching certificate by doing so.

The hour and a half on Thursdays, therefore, was a penitential period for Jessica and she was always thankful when, five minutes before the bell went for break, she was able to say, "Put your work away now, and tidy up."

There was left only the single period after break. It was on the timetable as English Language, and that, in effect, was supposed to mean analysis and parsing. Jessica said, on this occasion as on others, "Take out your library books and read quietly." The children, who cared little about their library books except as screens for the current issues of comic papers, women's twopenny magazines, and other enthralling reading matter, settled down happily and Jessica got her record book up to date by filling in Friday's entries in advance. She knew what went on behind the cover-up of library books, but offered no opposition unless, at some more than usually salacious disclosure, half-smothered giggles could be heard.

As soon as school was over, Jessica went along to the high street as usual. As it was early-closing day, Abel Lushman's, Shandy's, and the shops across the way were all shut and, except for an occasional almost empty tram-car, the high street was deserted. She looked across and saw that there was now only one griffin in the window of the flat above the grocer's shop.

What was more, part of the curtain which had cut off the bay window from the rest of the room had been dragged aside too hastily, it seemed, for it hung awkwardly, as though part of it had been torn away from the curtain rod. This, coupled with the disappearance of one of the griffins, found Jessica not only intrigued but alarmed.

Again her childhood superstitions that the griffins were evil came back to her. The discrepancies in the evidence concerning them no longer seemed to her to matter. Whether the burned-out summerhouse had caused the death of an old woman or a young girl; whether a griffin had been the background for a target when the squire's heir had been shot; whether the dealer in antiques had committed arson in order to claim his insurance money, all seemed immaterial. Jessica, gazing with quickened pulse-beats across the high street at the semi-denuded window, thought only of the missing griffin and of what its disappearance might mean. Had the other griffin killed it, she wondered. She smiled at her own foolish thoughts.

She was certain that she knew which griffin had disappeared. When she had seen them during the dinner hour, at about twelve-thirty, they had been facing one another. She judged the spacing with her eye and deduced that they had still been face to face when one of them had been removed. It was the one on her left (as she had looked at them) which had disappeared.

Disappeared? Commonsense, as before, came to her aid. What must have happened, she inferred, was that, in dusting the objects, the owner had knocked one of them to the floor. Either she had not bothered to replace it, or else the sinister creature had been damaged by its fall.

However, thrown slightly off balance by the discovery that there was now only one griffin in the window, Jessica was in a quandary. On the one hand, she was determined to find out what had happened to the missing griffin. On the other hand, the thought of bearding a prostitute in her den

and perhaps disturbing her in the middle of heaven only knew what extraordinary sexual orgies, was almost too terrifying to contemplate.

There was a tough streak in her, however, the streak which had armour-plated her against the snobbishness of the “paying girls” at school and which had helped her to bide her time until she could prove herself; the streak which was going to give her no rest until, having decided to find out what had happened to the second griffin, she had stormed what she saw as a formidable fortress and satisfied her curiosity.

Of one thing she could be certain. The griffin had been taken from its accustomed place at some time between twelve-thirty and four-thirty that day and the dragged-aside curtain made it clear that a sudden upsurge of emotion on somebody’s part had led to the disappearance of the ornament. Jessica was fit and strong, but unaccustomed to physical violence. She was tempted once again to leave well alone, to try to forget the griffins and go home to tea, but she knew that, if she did this, she would be nagged ever afterwards by doubts and self-criticism. She looked around her. The high street still seemed dead except for the occasional passing tram-cars, and even these, at that time in the afternoon, still were almost empty. There were no shoppers because all the shops were shut and, with the gala over, and all the prizes gone from Lushman’s and Shandy’s windows, there were no loitering schoolchildren assessing the merits of a watch against a case of spoons “for me mum,” or a pair of spiked running shoes against a cricket bat.

Again she looked round. There was a tram in the distance. She waited for it to pass. She had thought of what seemed to her a valid excuse for entering the alley on the opposite side of the street. She would make her way to the outside staircase which must lead to the flat (there had been such an arrangement at her first home after the

Denefields had left Longwater Sedge) and she would call at the flat to ask whether the griffins were for sale. She almost hoped that nobody would be there to answer her knock, but, at any rate, she would have tried and would have done enough to save her self-respect.

The alley which flanked the grocer's shop was the original entrance to what had been the inn yard. Jessica crossed the high street, paused for a moment, and then dodged into the alley and almost immediately came to a wooden door in a wall to her right which obviously was the way to the back of the shop.

She did not expect to find the yard door locked, since it must also be the way in for the tenant of the flat. She pushed it open and found, as she had expected, that it led into a small enclosure in which were empty packing-cases and a row of dustbins, but there was also the staircase leading up to the flat.

She mounted it and knocked on the door at the top. Nobody answered, so she tried again, but again there was no reply. She stood irresolute for a few minutes, but then decided that there could be no harm in trying once more. This time she banged more loudly and then was startled to hear a man's voice say, "They mostly walk straight in." She looked in the direction from which the voice came, but saw nobody. The voice had come from across the wooden fence which separated the grocer's plot of waste ground from that of the fruiterer's next door.

"Oh, thank you," she called out, but there was no reply. She took the advice she had been offered and entered the flat, leaving the outer door open. A corridor, relict of the time when the house had been an inn, seemed to run the whole width of the flat. The first room she entered was a kitchen, for she saw a gas cooker, a table, cupboards, and a sink. The floor was covered with linoleum and, except for some unwashed crockery in the sink, everything was neat, tidy, and clean. Jessica banged on the table and called out

to ask whether anybody was at home, but again there was no reply.

In view of the fact that the back door had been left unlocked, this surprised her. In Longwater Sedge nobody ever bothered to lock the door during daylight, even when they went out, but Jessica had lived long enough in her digs and at her college hostel to have formed the impression that townspeople left their doors unlocked only when they were at home. She went to the next room along the corridor, banged on that door, and called out again. If the tenant was in the flat, even if she were deaf, she must surely be aware by this time, thought Jessica, that she had a visitor.

Jessica knew nothing about prostitutes except that they entertained men for money and probably kept unusual hours, but, even if this particular woman was busy with a client, she must surely leave him and come out to see what all the noise was about. Nobody put in an appearance. It seemed that the flat must be empty and that the back door had been left unlocked either because there was nothing worth stealing or else by an oversight.

She banged on the door and called out again to make sure that she was alone in the place and was reassured by a silence which was broken only by the sound of a tram passing by in the narrow high street. She opened the door and the next instant she wished she had done nothing of the kind. The room looked as though a typhoon had hit it. The curtain which had shut off the big bay window had not merely been pulled aside; it had been almost torn apart. One griffin was still on the window ledge. The other was in the middle of the carpeted floor and there was blood on the heavy rectangular base of it.

Jessica was not unaccustomed to blood. In her childhood she had been present at a pig-killing and had watched her mother eviscerate rabbits and poultry. It was not the blood on the griffin, but the state of the room which appalled her.

6

Police and Worse

A gate-legged table had been overturned, chairs looked as though they had been thrown against the wall, a bookcase was on its side and the books, some flown open, were scattered all over the floor, and a witchball (the only object except for the solitary griffin on the window ledge which appeared to have escaped assault) was lying against one of the overturned chairs. A cabinet which seemed to have housed china was in two pieces, its front a ruin of jagged glass with broken glass on the floor, and there were bits of porcelain and pottery all over the room.

Jessica, dazed by the spectacle, went back to the griffin which had disappeared from the window. It was not until she picked it up that she realised that the carpet also was wet. She put the griffin down and looked around the wreckage. It was then, in the darkest part of the room, that she saw the dead woman.

“Now could we go over it just once more, miss?”

“I don’t see why,” said Jessica’s headmistress, to whose house the girl had fled as soon as she saw the body and had wiped the blood off the fingers which had touched the carpet when she had picked up the griffin. “Miss Denefield has come to you and has told you a perfectly straightforward story. There is no reason for you to suppose

that she will alter it." The Detective-Superintendent ignored her and said to Jessica, "You broke into the flat, then, miss?"

"No, I didn't break in. I was advised to go in. I was told that visitors always did."

"And you don't know who told you this?"

"No. I never saw him. I suppose he heard me knocking and banging and just called out to me."

"Perhaps you ladies would care for a cup of tea," said the Detective-Superintendent suddenly.

"Are you proposing to detain us, then?" asked Jessica's headmistress.

"You, madam, are free to go whenever you wish."

"I'll be all right, Miss Ware," said Jessica. She turned to the Detective-Superintendent. "Could you let my landlady know where I am if you are going to keep me much longer? She'll be worried."

"You have given us your address, miss. I will get a message to her."

"Well," said Miss Ware, "I've got a meeting, so I had better go. Mr. Salcombe, you have a daughter at my school, so I trust you will remember that Miss Denefield is also young, inexperienced, and defenceless."

She went out with dignity, pausing only to thank the constable who opened the door for her and to say over her shoulder to the Detective-Superintendent, "Margaret's spelling is weak. If she wants to be a shorthand-typist she will need to improve it."

Both he and Jessica relaxed when the door had closed behind her. Tea was brought to Jessica and she was grateful for it. The Detective-Superintendent said, "You've had a nasty shock, miss. Talking about it will help. Tell me again what made you go to the flat."

"I can't tell you any more than I've told you already. I thought I recognised the two ornaments in the window and I'd been making up my mind for some time that I would offer to buy them. [This was not strictly true, but sounded

reasonable.] Then this afternoon I saw that one of them was missing, so that settled it. I thought the other one might go, too, so I went across and—well, I've told you the rest."

"Was the body that of anybody you know?"

"You asked me that. I told you it wasn't."

"You told me when Miss Ware was present. I thought you might like to change your answer now she's gone."

"No, there is nothing to change. I'm at my first post out of college. I don't know a soul in this town except the staff at school and my landlady. I've spoken to one or two parents and one or two shopkeepers, but that's all. I've never seen the dead woman before. I don't even know whether she was the tenant of the flat."

"You haven't said that before, miss."

"I hadn't thought of it until now."

"Oh, well, it just shows how perseverance pays dividends. Why have you thought of it now, just suddenly, like that?"

"I don't know. I took it for granted that she was the tenant, but she needn't have been, need she?"

"Did you think, before you went over there, that the tenant was a woman?"

"Yes, I was sure she was."

"Yet you say you had never seen her before."

"No, I hadn't, but the man who keeps the sports outfitters on the opposite side of the high street told me the tenant was a woman."

"Now we're getting somewhere. That means he can identify her, then, and that will help us a lot."

"Oh, but I don't know whether he had ever seen her, either."

"Come again, miss?"

"He only told me that she had gentlemen visitors. He thought she was—she was—well, that kind of a woman."

"Not on *my* patch she wasn't! I should soon have sent her to the right-about. I'm not standing for any red-light

district here. Did Shandy—you do mean Shandy, don't you?—did he mention the names of any of her visitors?"

"No, but he thought some of them were—well—prominent in the town, but that may only have been a spiteful remark because the council put up the rates this year and the shopkeepers didn't like it."

"She wasn't a prostitute, miss, although I'll admit we've had our eye on her. It's a pity you picked up the implement, miss."

"Yes, but I didn't know that the woman had been killed with it. Look, honestly, I can't tell you any more. Can't I go?"

"For the moment, yes, miss, but you'll be wanted at the inquest, of course."

"I can't take time off school for that!"

"I'm afraid you've no option, miss. If you were ill you'd have to take time off, wouldn't you?"

"Will you tell the education committee?"

"Why, certainly, miss. If you should think of anything else, you'll let us know, won't you?"

"Well, the verdict, as expected, has left the ball very much in our court," said Salcombe. "I'm thinking of calling in the Yard. She turns out to have been a bigger fish than we thought."

"And have them find out that we have a notorious fence on our patch and knew nothing about it until the inquest, sir?" asked Detective-Sergeant Bedford.

"Yes, I see what you mean. Her cover was pretty clever, though."

"Being on the fringe of the law over her fortune-telling or whatever? Yes, sir. We had our eye on her for that and never thought about anything more serious."

"Is there anything in the young lady's impression that the woman was a tart? I told her there wasn't. What do *you* say?"

"I don't think so, sir. I've seen Shandy and he admits that he did give Miss Denefield that impression, but was only pulling her leg. Same with his remarks about prominent townsmen sneaking up that back alley."

"He'd better watch his step. He could make a lot of mischief."

"So I warned him, sir. I didn't think there was any point in tackling him again, so I had a talk with Lushman, the chap who keeps the pop shop next door."

"Oh, yes. Pawn your overcoat and get the blanket out. Swop them over next morning and live happy ever after, all snug both day and night, thanks to the goodwill of Uncle."

"I think it's more a case of swopping your false teeth for the price of a pint, sir. Anyway, Lushman confirms the young lady's story about the candle-holders. I guess they were used as a signal to show whether she would be at home to receive stolen property or whether she was expecting to be at her other place of business up in London. She did her flitting at night. Lushman never saw her go out or come back, except for a bit of shopping. Her London business was a corset-makers in Bermondsey and perfectly legit and above board. The trouble is that the staff only knew her as Madame Setier and that was the name under which the business was run. The forewoman doesn't think it was her real name, although, at the inquest, she identified her, thanks to our newspaper photograph. And the rent collector confirmed her identity. We've been lucky so far, sir."

"I don't see how you make that out. We haven't the first vestige of a clue as to who did for her. Was the motive robbery, do you suppose?"

"I doubt whether she ever kept the fenced stuff on the premises, sir. Her frequent trips to London seem to indicate that she didn't. I would opt for a spot of blackmail. She had the goods on somebody, I would think, and he turned on her."

"Yes, blackmailers do live dangerously. What about her landlord, the grocer? He *was* her landlord, I suppose?"

"No, sir. The shop and the flat were rented separately. The landlord is a Mr. Tavistock. He lives in Luton and knows nothing about his tenants so long as they pay the rent. He's a biggish property owner and employs a full-time rent collector. I think that's one of the men—perhaps the only man—that Shandy ever saw go down the alley. My bet is that the thieves found out by daylight, according to which way the candlesticks were facing, whether she would be in that night to receive the stuff."

"That girl sticks in my gizzard. Her prints were superimposed on all the others which we found on that heavy ornament."

"Yes, sir. Of course we had to take her dabs. All the same, I don't see this as a woman's crime. Stick a knife or a hatpin in another woman, yes. Bash her with a bloomin' great stone ornament, no."

"She's tall enough and strong enough, you know, and women ain't what they used to be. I think we'll keep the tabs on her. She didn't come to us 'til she'd contacted Miss Ware and got advice. You'd think an innocent girl would have rushed screaming into the street and one of our chaps would have brought her along to talk to us."

"Well, if there *is* blackmail attached to the business, I suppose Miss Denefield is as likely a killer as anybody else. The last thing a schoolteacher can do with is any scandal attached to her name. Says she came from a village in Hampshire called Longwater Sedge, before the family moved nearer to London. Might be an idea to make a few enquiries down there, don't you think?"

"Hardly worthwhile. You might perhaps check, but she left the village at the age of nine, she says, and no scandal could attach itself to a child of that age. Check what you can of her doings since she's been living here. That's the likeliest fish to fry. There's another thing we ought to look

into, though. Miss Denefield said a fellow next door told her 'they' always walked straight into the flat. I wonder who 'they' were. It sounds as though they were her *daylight* visitors, if this man saw them arrive."

"Those who were paying blackmail money, don't you think, sir?—or just fools who wanted their fortunes told. That sounds more like women than men, though."

"Sounds possible. Don't give up on Shandy. Lean on him good and proper. He may not have been lying to Miss Denefield when he mentioned some of our leading citizens. I suppose the next-door man hasn't been tracked down yet?—the chap who advised her to walk into the flat?"

"No, sir, we can't get a line on him at all. The shop was shut and the shopkeeper whose yard he was in says he had no business on his premises and he knows nothing whatever about him. It was early closing and the premises should have been deserted."

"Odd sort of business. He could be our murderer, you know. He could have hopped over the fence when he heard Miss Denefield in the alley and, realising she was a stranger to the flat, decided to let her be the one to find the body."

"A dirty trick to play on an innocent girl, sir."

"A murderer wouldn't bother about that. At any rate, Miss Ware, of course, brought her straight round to us, so no time was lost. We can establish that the murder was done between half-twelve and half-four, and, as the blood on the carpet and on the base of the ornament was still wet, the death couldn't have taken place much before the later time. That lends colour to the idea that the man who spoke to Miss Denefield over the fence could be our murderer. Find out if anybody saw a man enter the alley at between three and four o'clock."

"I've tried, sir, but he picked the best possible afternoon. *All* the shops were shut and the high street was almost empty of people. Early-closing day is as bad as a

Sunday—worse, in fact, because there aren't even people going to church."

"Well, there wouldn't be, not at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Anyway, keep at it until something turns up, which it will. See whether Lushman can come up with the names of any *daytime* visitors the woman ever had. There seem to have been others besides the rent collector and *his* day is Monday."

"I'm sorry, Miss Denefield," said her landlady, "but I can't put up with the publicity. What with you and the police and the reporters, I don't know where I am. You'll have to go, dear, sorry though I am to lose you, but I really can't put up with it. I've read about murders and once the police find this murderer there will be you giving your story to the magistrates and then you again in the witness-box at the Old Bailey, and everything in the papers and your picture in the Sundays—I can't face it."

"Well, I've got to," said Jessica, "and, if you turn me out, where am I to go? Everybody in the town will have the same objections to me as you have."

"I'm sorry, dear, really I am."

"Look here, will you let me stay until the police make an arrest? This will all die down until they do. The worst is over until then."

But the worst for Jessica was not over. Miss Ware waylaid her after assembly in the last week of term and said abruptly, "Set your class to work and come and see me in my room."

"It's scripture lesson and mine is the only Bible. So low down in the school the children don't have them."

"Set them some arithmetic to get on with, and be quick about it. I'm expecting the chairman of the education

committee and the appointments secretary, and I'd better brief you before they come."

There was no time for this. Two serious, middle-aged, self-important gentlemen were already in the head's tiny office when Jessica knocked on the door. They were occupying the two chairs kept for abusive or anxious parents and the headmistress was in her own seat at her desk, so Jessica had to stand, since neither man rose to offer her a seat. She sensed what was in the air. Her landlady's attitude had given her sufficient clue. Knowing quite well what was coming, she said, "You want me to go, I suppose."

"Well, Miss Denefield," said the chairman, a prosperous coal merchant, "we have the good name of the school to consider."

"I've done nothing against it."

"No, we appreciate that, but our teachers are not accustomed to mix themselves up with the police."

"Miss Denefield only did her duty in going to the police," said Miss Ware quietly.

"Yes, yes, of course, but the stigma on the school remains."

"What stigma?" asked Jessica angrily.

"Oh, come, now, Miss Denefield," said the appointments secretary, known to the school staff as "the local officer."

"What call did you have to visit a flat whose occupant you didn't know?"

"As I told the police, to offer to buy some ornaments she had."

"Which, from what we now know, could have been stolen property."

"I was not to know that she was connected with thieves."

The chairman stood up.

"There is no point in going on talking," he said. "The question for you, Miss Denefield, is whether you choose to

resign or accept a transfer. In either case, Miss Ware is prepared to give you an excellent testimonial to which I shall be pleased to add my commendation."

"And if I refuse to resign or ask for a transfer?"

The two men glanced at Miss Ware. Miss Ware said, "Be sensible, my dear. I'll see to your class for the rest of the morning. You go home and write a request for a transfer." Jessica turned away, opened the door, and closed it very quietly behind her. Then she went into the children's cloakroom and burst into tears.

After a bit she calmed herself, rinsed her face, and dried it on her petticoat, not fancying the one roller towel provided for the children and finding her handkerchief too wet with tears to be of very much use. Miss Ware found her and said, "They've gone. They'll pay you your summer holiday month's salary, of course, but they don't expect you to come back here next term and, frankly, I hope you won't attempt it out of bravado. The Barge School at Narrowboat Quay will be vacant in September. They are prepared to appoint you. It comes just within their area and they realise you're being very harshly treated."

"I suppose *you* pointed that out to them."

"Of course I did, but I have to be careful, you know. My own appointment is in their hands and they can be very narrow-minded people. Would you take the Barge School? It's a single-handed post and you know what the canal children are like—here today and gone tomorrow. It's not the most satisfying of jobs for a young teacher, but if you care to apply for it, it's yours. You'll be classed as a head teacher and that might stand you in good stead later on."

"I shall be sorry to leave here. If they'll give me the Barge School, I'll take it. You've been very good to me," said Jessica, her tears breaking out again. This time she brushed them aside, walked back to her digs to write her letter of resignation, wrote another applying for the Barge School

and a third, this one to her mother: "Could uncle and aunt have me for a few days? All news when I see you."

She received a commendatory reference from Miss Ware and an invitation to attend an appointments committee meeting at the education offices. Here no reference whatever was made to the murder. It was almost a replica of the meeting at which she had been appointed to her post at Miss Ware's school except that no headmistress was present.

Her testimonials from her school, the headmaster of the mixed school at which she had done her pre-college student-teacher year, the college testimonial and the "character" testimonial from the head of the college hostel, and Miss Ware's own contribution all met with an approval which was no indication of the fact that the committee had seen them all before.

She had not seen the Barge School before the day the interview took place, but she thought she ought to be in a position to say that at least she knew where it was and what it looked like. Being young, resilient, and, to some extent, adventurous, she even found herself looking forward to the new post and being in sole charge of it, responsible for syllabuses, timetables, and all the rest.

The school was a grim building almost on the right bank of the then newly amalgamated waterways which were collectively known as the Grand Union Canal, although elderly residents of the town still referred to their branch of it as the Grand Junction Canal. The high street crossed it by a bridge which also marked the western boundary of the town, and the school might almost have been described as the first and last house, the first for people entering the town from the west, the last for people leaving it.

It had no playground, for it had been built as a warehouse. While Jessica was looking at it, two barge-women passed by, going down the high street to do some shopping. She wondered whether either of them ever came

to the school to speak to the teacher. Their stern, leathery faces and their ruched black bonnets, headgear seen nowhere except on the narrow-boats, made them seem alien and strange. She wondered how she would get on with their nomadic children. At half-past two in the afternoon—it was a Saturday—she went before the appointments committee. She was angry and frustrated, but she was also resigned to the fact that it was not only useless but dangerous to give way to her sense of injustice in the face of those vested in authority who had her whole career in their hands. When she left the interview with her appointment to the Barge School agreed and ratified, she forced herself to look on the bright side of what had happened since she had come upon the murdered body of the so-called Madame Setier, and decided that this part of her life was interesting, if not pleasant.

The police had not been in contact with her for a couple of weeks. That was a relief, but the staff room at Miss Ware's school had been a hive of speculation and curiosity in which the bees stopped buzzing whenever she walked in. She knew that one or two of her fellow teachers were jealous of Miss Ware's approval of a raw but promising recruit to the profession and she had overheard a spiteful remark about "a snuggle into the Great Bed," a reference to Miss Ware's surname which could not be mistaken.

Jessica knew that nobody on the staff even remotely suspected her of murder, but she also knew that only diffidence, under the semblance of kindness and good manners, prevented her less hostile colleagues from questioning her openly about her visit to the flat above the grocer's shop, and this reticence she found embarrassing.

The Barge School, she began to think, might prove a haven after some troubled waters. Moreover, at parting Miss Ware had said, "When all this has blown over and I have my next headship in Middlesex, which is on salary scale four, whereas here we are only on scale three, I shall find a place

on my staff for you. Keep your chin up, my dear. You'll like the Barge School, you know. There are opportunities there if you care to take them."

7

The Haunted Flat

It was while she was at the riverside cottage with her relatives that Jessica had what was to her mind a revolutionary idea. It occurred to her one evening when she was alone with her mother. Her uncle had gone out on his usual excursion to look at the evening rise of the trout and her aunt had gone with him, leaving Jessica and her mother to get the supper. Mrs. Denefield said, "Your uncle and aunt ben very good to me all this while, but 'em must often wish they'd got this place to theirselves. Do 'ee think your landlady would have me to share your room?"

"She won't even have *me*, let alone you as well, mum," said Jessica.

"Won't have 'ee no more? And for why not?"

"All that publicity about the murder and the police and the reporters. Oh, I don't blame her. She stood it as long as she could, but, as she said, once the police make an arrest it will be the same upset all over again. I can't be left out of it because I found the body."

"I ben thinken about that. You know that picture as was in all the papers? Well, seemed like somebody as once I met when I used to help out up at the Hall. Do it mean 'ee ent got nowhere to live when 'ee goes back to school?"

"The caretaker's wife will put me up for a bit, and I'm not going back to school, either; anyway, not to the same

school. I'm going back as head teacher, but not at the same place."

"You'm over young to be en charge, bean't 'ee?"

"Oh, it's only a temporary job. Look, mum, if you can stay here a bit longer, I think I could find a flat for us."

"Me and you?"

"Yes."

"Furnished rooms? But I got me bits of things, you know. Only means gotten 'em out of store."

"Not furnished rooms, mum. I'm thinking about a proper flat. I think I know of one to let. We could take your furniture out of store, so not paying for storage would help a bit towards the rent, and I think I could manage the rest. We might have to go a bit carefully for a time, but my salary will go up and by the time I'm at the top of the scale it will be easy enough for us to manage."

"Well, see what your uncle think to it. I got a bit put by."

"It's our business, yours and mine. Look, let's wait until I see if I can get the flat and then we'll tell uncle and aunt about it."

"I'd like for us to be together. I got a bit put by, like I say. Your uncle won't take nothen for my keep and your aunt and me makes sandwiches, ham and beef, for the gentlemen who wants 'em when they're fishen and they pays well and often there's a tip or two, so I could afford to get the furniture moved out and down to 'ee when you're ready."

Jessica went back at the end of the week and, having left her luggage at the railway station, she went straight to the grocer's shop and asked for the landlord's address. Then she walked to the Barge School and found the caretaker. She had met him and received a set of keys from him before she had left the town to visit her uncle and aunt, so this was her third visit to the school.

"So you're back, miss?" he said. "Mother's got the room all ready for you. We'll get along, then, shall us? Tea's

ready.”

The room was small, but clean. Jessica paid a week's rent in advance, was given her tea, and settled down to write a letter to the landlord of the flat above the grocer's. She thought of giving a false name, but decided that this might lead to complications later on, so she added her usual signature and enclosed a stamped addressed envelope. She wrote in the letter, “I understand that the flat figured recently in a case in the papers, so I think the rent ought to be substantially reduced, otherwise I would not be interested. I have references which you will find satisfactory and a steady job. Please reply without delay or I shall be obliged to look elsewhere for accommodation.”

She got her reply in the form of a visit from the rent collector. The flat owner's reply was favourable, the rent was fixed for a tenancy of three years and was within the limit she could afford to pay. A month of it was payable in advance. She signed the agreement, produced the money, and was aware of a surprised stare from the man after he had looked the document over. However, he made no comment except to ask when she expected to move in.

“As soon as I can tell my mother to join me with her furniture,” said Jessica. When he had gone, she wrote to her mother, but did not say which flat she had rented.

Jessica spent the next week in clearing out cupboards at the Barge School, examining textbooks and stationery, and in looking through the registers. There was a pile of these, nearly all of them completely out of date. There was also a school log which recorded the visits of HM Inspectors of Schools and other items which previous teachers-in-charge had deemed important.

There was also a punishment book, but its pages were blank. This was scarcely surprising, thought Jessica, since an inspection of the registers had shown that the children of

the narrow-boats sometimes were in school for only one or two days and none appeared to stay longer than a week. A school had to be provided for them, but whether their turn-around stay was as short as the record of attendances indicated, or whether a certain amount of truancy prevailed, she did not know and did not propose to attempt to find out.

She was not alone in the building. Painters and decorators were in. Cynically, Jessica supposed that to get the drab building looking a little more attractive was the authority's way of clearing its conscience about the unfairness of her removal from her previous post. She settled down at a table and went through the most recently used school register, carefully crossing out the names of all the children who, by the beginning of term, would be fourteen years of age.

She retained her room in the caretaker's house until she was notified of her mother's arrival and the delivery of the furniture which had been in store. Together they superintended its disposal about the flat. Jessica still mentioned nothing of the previous history of the apartment, but her mother was shrewd enough to question her.

"Seems a big place," she said. "Can 'ee afford it, like?"

"Yes," said Jessica. "Not everybody likes a big old place like this. I'm getting it cheap."

"Didn't your uncle read me out a piece as said it happened over a grocer's?"

"Maybe. Well, to tell you the truth, yes, this is the place, but what does it matter? Somebody has died in every old house. The rooms have been cleared out and cleaned and that's all that really matters. Don't you like the flat?"

"Oh, ah, it's very nice. Furniture look a bit lost in these great rooms, though, don't it? And the cupboards! Big as the rooms in your uncle's cottage, 'em be."

"Well, this flat goes over both the shops down below. The whole house used to be an inn and, before that, it was a

merchant's house. The town has gone downhill a good bit since these places were built."

"I wish 'ee'd move your bed into my room."

"Oh, mother!"

"I doubt I'll sleep o'nights in that vasty great place."

"Well, I gave you the best room, but I'll change over with you if you like. I can have your bed and you can have mine."

"I'm used to a double bed. No, I reckon us'll leave things as they are. It didn't happen in either of the bedrooms, did it?"

"No. I found her in the room with the built-out bay window and I'll shut that room up. We don't need it and we're not going to use it. I decided on that when I took the flat. When my money goes up we can look for somewhere else."

"You said 'ee'd got this place for three year."

"I don't have to stick to that. It's only so that after three years the landlord can put up the rent. The three years are binding on him, not on me."

"We don't want no lawyer trouble. Take everything 'ee got, lawyers do, once 'em get a foot in the door."

They spent the rest of Jessica's summer holiday going out and about on cheap but enjoyable excursions. They picnicked in the local park, walked by the river and along the banks of the canal, and one day they explored the strange hinterland of the Barge School where the canal met the river. They went into the school itself a couple of times and the second time they found that the painting outside and the decorating inside the building were finished and the workmen gone.

A week after term began, Jessica went back to the flat as usual for her lunch and found the place empty. There was a note on the kitchen table. *Get yourself bread and cheese cook when I get home.*

"What's all this?" she asked, when her mother came back at tea-time. "Did you go to the pictures this afternoon?"

"No, I never. I went to see about a little job."

"A job? Whatever for? There's no need for you to go out to work."

"Ent nothen to do in this place after I washed up breakfast and done a bit of cleanen. Last night 'ee said you'd be taken sangwidges for your lunch, which means I got all day on my hands."

"Well, I want to put in some extra time at school with the kids and it's either got to be in the dinner hour or at four when school closes. Half an hour at twelve is better for them and me. Their schooling is so intermittent and broken up that their reading is miles behind that of their normal age-group. I want to help them all I can."

"I doubt they're handy enough on the barges. Don't take readen to tackle lock gates and lead a pullen horse along the tow-path, do it?"

"They may not stay with the narrow-boats all their lives. But what sort of job are you after?"

"I ent arter it. I got it. Seen the advert in the winder of that little shop what sell papers and that, so I goed ail-along to the address they give. It's to look after an old lady and do the cleanen and the shoppen and that."

"But, mum, I'm a teacher! I can't have my mother go out charring."

"I ent a char. I told the old lady how it were and I'm called housekeeper. Look, my dear, I can't abide in this place all alone all day. I gets fancyen things."

"Oh, dear! What sort of things?"

"There be noises."

"There always are, in an old house."

"Eyes keepen on looken in on me."

"Oh, mother! There couldn't be!"

"Somebody what skulk about in that attic."

"Rats, I expect. I'll buy a trap."

"'Tedn't rats. I knows all about rats. Your uncle's cottage be reddled with 'em."

"Well, why don't I hear all these things?"

"You sleeps too sound, that's for why."

"You mean you hear things at night, too?"

"Somebody copen about over my yead."

"Oh, mother, really!"

"You only calls me mother when you be feelen out wi' me."

"Sorry, mum. I'm not 'out' with you at all. You can't get that murder out of your mind, can you? But nobody is going to murder either of *us*. Anyway, we can't afford to live anywhere else. You want us to be together, don't you?"

"Why for do 'ee go peeken into that room as we keeps shut up? Every mornen, afore 'ee go out, 'ee opens that there old door and takes a look inside."

"I want to make sure the griffin is still there. The police took the other one, the one that killed the woman. I expect it's in their black museum, unless they've given it to Madame Tussaud's. What sort of hours will you have to put in on this housekeeping job?"

"'Tes all for the bettermost. Leave when you do in the mornen and get back when 'ee gets in at night. If 'ee's latish, there be shelter in the alley 'til 'ee come. I ent goen into this yer flat on my own no more."

"Oh, mother! I don't like it at all, you going out to work."

"For why not? I be gotten my bit and drap midday and her darter come for her to take her to their place for tea and supper and bring her back home at night. 'Tedn't my fault 'ee puts in extra time at school. 'Ee don't even get paid for it."

"'Twere good I do so much for charity," said Jessica lightly; but she was worried. She had never thought of her mother as a superstitious woman. She herself, she had always supposed, was the fanciful member of the family.

There was nothing wrong with the flat and yet her mother would rather go out to work than stay in it alone.

When Jessica had dismissed her only two volunteer readers at twelve-thirty on the following day, she wrote to her uncle, went round to the post office for a stamped envelope, addressed it, and posted the letter. It ran, "Mum isn't happy here. We get on well together, as I knew we would, but she doesn't like the flat. I think the murder has got on her nerves. There is nothing wrong with the flat and she has got all her own furniture round her, but she does not like being alone while I'm at school. She has got herself a job, but I don't want her to have to go out to work. What shall I do? Even with the money she will earn, I couldn't really afford much more rent than I'm paying here, but I think to move out of the flat is what she has in mind."

She did not expect an early reply, knowing that country people are poor correspondents, so she was not in the least surprised or disappointed at receiving no answer during the ensuing week. On the Friday evening she said to her mother, "I'll give up my dinnertime coaching if you'll give up your job, mum. I don't like the idea of you working at your age."

"I likes my job. Don't take nothen out of me and I ent *that* old. My old lady ent no trouble. Asked me if I'd ever thought about liven in, but I told her I couldn't do that, haven you to think about."

"And if you didn't have me to think about?"

"It's a lovely, easy-run, modern sort of house with all convenience and a nice bit of garden back and front and a jobben man twice a week to tend it. My old lady is a bit drawlatchet, her legs not clever like 'em used to be. Her could do with me there full-time."

"Well, you must do as you like, of course, mum."

The next person to speak to Jessica about the flat was the grocer in the shop below. She happened to be his only customer at the time.

"You're a bold one," he said, weighing out the pound of raisins she had asked for.

"How do you mean?" (So her mother had been talking to him, she decided.)

"You been up into that attic of yours?"

"No, I don't need to. There's more room anyway than we want. Why?"

"Your mam reckons as that attic is haunted. There's a ghost up there. Maybe more than one, she says."

"There are no such things as ghosts."

"No more there is, but I had an Irish grandmother on my mother's side and you should hear the things *she* had to tell of!"

"*If* there's anything, it's rats. They come off the docks, I suppose. That's the worst of being so near the river and the canal. I've told mother I'll set a trap."

"Yes, your mam, she's heard things. You know, don't you, as your flat extend over the two shops? The main staircase was bricked up long ago, so I haven't got no upstairs and the police knows as I haven't."

"Oh, did they think *you* might have murdered that woman?" asked Jessica, with apparent innocence.

"They come snoopin' around, stands to reason, but they found the staircase front of my shop all bricked up, same as it was when I first come 'ere. Tackled him next door, too. They reckoned the back stairs went up from his place and the front stairs from mine. Course, you might be right about the rats, but, there again, you might not. I *did* hear as the deceased—that's a kinder word than "dead," I reckon—as her was a very rich woman."

"Who, if she had any sense, kept her money at the bank or invested in stocks and shares," said Jessica, "not hidden away in my attic."

"All as I meant to say was that, if you and your ma gets to hearing things overhead, it may be rats, it may be ghosties, but it ain't me or my missus, that's all."

"The police must have given you a going-over, Mr. Bond," said Jessica, with mock sympathy. His wife came from the back of the shop.

"You got that order out for Shipley?" she asked aggressively. She eyed Jessica, but the girl paid for the raisins, took the change, and walked out. As she went, she heard the shrewish wife remark, "And don't you get hobnobbin' with that gal. I don't want no trouble in this shop."

On the following morning Jessica received a reply to the letter she had written to her uncle.

"Tell your mam as she's welcome to come back here any time her wish," her uncle had written. "Us misses her company."

Jessica showed her mother the letter, but Mrs. Denefield shook her head.

"For one thing, I ben a nuisance to 'em long enough," she said, "and, for another, I ent goen to leave 'ee here on your own."

"If I could find myself some lodgings, would you go?"

"No, that I 'udn't. I'd put my furniture back to store and go and live in at my old lady's place 'til us can afford sommat else."

For a week or two there were no unexplained noises in the flat, but one Saturday when she was making the weekend purchases in his shop while her mother went to the butcher's, Jessica said to the greengrocer who had the shop next door to Bond, the grocer, "Do *you* have much trouble with rats?"

"Can't help it when you live so near the docks and sells foodstuffs," he replied.

"What do you do about them?"

"Pi'son."

"I'm sure I've got them in the attic. My mother says the noises up there have started up again and they're heavier than they were."

"Seen anything of 'em, have you?"

"No. They don't seem to come into the flat itself, thank goodness."

"Tain't likely to be rats, then. They're sensible fellers and goes where the food is. I wonders how you likes being in that flat, considering."

"Considering that a murder took place there and that I found the body? I like the flat because it's commodious and cheap and because the murder was nothing to do with me. The police don't seem to be doing much about it, do they? There's been nothing in the papers for quite a while."

"Give 'em time. Give 'em time. Rome wasn't built in a day. They haven't give up. You can be sure of that. Like terrier dogs they be, once they get their teeth into anything. Given you a bit of a roasting, I dare say, being as it was you as found her."

"What sort of woman was she?"

"Hard to say. Used to pop in here, arst for what she wanted, and pop out again. All as is knowed about her come out at the inquest, I reckon. A proper dark horse she must have bin, from all accounts. A foreigner, most likely, or a gypso. That fortune-tellin' lark could have bin a cover-up for anything, couldn't it?"

"Did you ever hear a quarrel or anybody being violent?"

"Not me; and if I had I shouldn't have done nothing about it. Keep clear of neighbours' business, that's my motto. Now excuse me. My busy morning."

There were one or two barge-women among the shoppers. Jessica smiled at them when she made her way out with her purchases. They gave her an unsmiling but civil nod. She did not know whether they were the mothers of any of her schoolchildren. None of the parents off the narrow-boats ever came up to the school.

She had made one effort by writing out invitations for the children to take home. It was her duty, she felt, to hold an Open Evening so that interested parents could come

along to look at the work which was being done. There proved to be no interested parents. She and her mother (who, as always, had refused to remain alone in the flat) waited until nine o'clock and then Jessica locked up and they went home.

It was the first time they had returned to the flat after dark and neither cared for the experience. They heard a scuttering noise as they entered and Mrs. Denefield clutched Jessica's arm. Nothing in the flat had been disturbed, but Jessica did not think that the sounds had been made by rats. She took longer than usual to get to sleep that night. Before she dozed off, she decided to get the door to the attic nailed up, but realised that she could not pay to have it done until she received next month's salary.

One Saturday afternoon after she had had what she regarded as her abortive conversations with the shopkeepers, she said to her mother while they were doing the washing-up after lunch,

"What do you make of the couple downstairs, the grocer and his wife?"

"Make of 'em? I don't believe I ever spoke with 'em. You does the grocer while I does the meat. Her looks a niggel-naggle sort of ooman, what little I've seed of her. As for him, I 'udn't hardly know him if I met him in the street. For why?"

"One morning I had a little talk with him before the shop filled up. It didn't come to anything, but it left me wondering whether he'd like to get rid of us out of here."

"What make 'ee think like that?"

"I don't exactly think it; I just wondered, that's all. I can't believe he knew as little about that dead woman as he says. Besides, I know the police have been at him and he knows, the same as everyone else in the town by this time, that I found the body. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he'd like to be shut of us and perhaps the greengrocer would, too."

“They couldn’t have nobody quieter overhead, see-en us is out all day and they go to their own homes in the evenen. What do ’ee mean about wanten to be shut on us?”

“Those noises we hear in the attic. When this place was built, there were two staircases up from those shops. What if somebody gets up there and makes the noises to try and frighten us away?”

“That ’ud mean him openen up shop again arter dark and somebody ’ud a-spotten en and give warnen of burglars, I reckon. Don’t ’ee go for to be-en fanciful, my dear. I be fritten enough as it is, without haven men on the prow above my yead. I’d sooner believe it was ghosties. Any road, sooner we can get out of here the better, but it ent fair of me to keep on fretten about that.”

8

Visitors

As the autumn began to drift into winter, the flat became oppressively gloomy. It was also increasingly difficult to keep it sufficiently heated for comfort. There was a fireplace in each bedroom and in the living-room, but the previous occupant seemed never to have used a coal fire. There was no coalshed in the yard and the grocer kept his own store in a lock-up just outside the back entrance to the shop. Questioned by Jessica's mother, he had said that the last tenant must have used gas fires and a gas cooker. He added, "This town lives on gas." He had waved towards the east where the great gasometers blotted out the sky and the only just-bearable smell of gas pervaded the whole of the high street.

"I likes a coal fire," said Mrs. Denefield. "I be a right dabster at cooken over a nice kitchen range with an oven to the side, but I hates gas contraptions. Why for can't us have a little coalshed built?"

"Because it would mean lugging buckets of coal up that outside stair and in all weathers. Forget it, mum," said Jessica.

"There do be lovely coal fires with my old lady."

"Well, you enjoy them, but here we've got the gas meter and the gas points, so that's the way it's got to be. We're lucky not to have the mess and bother of using the grates."

"Suppose there was an escape? I've heard of people dyen that way."

"If there's an escape, we switch off at the main and tell the gas men. It's perfectly simple."

"It ent cosy without a nice fire burnen all bright and warm and cheerful. Winter's bad enough, with all the cold and wet and the mist what come in off the river, but, without a bit of comfort, I might as well be under the ground. Shan't feel nothen there."

"If I could find somebody to share the flat, would you live in at your old lady's?"

"Where 'ud 'ee find anybody?"

"Write to the schools. There must be some young teachers in digs who would love to share a flat."

"Not if they knowed what had gone on in this 'un. I knows you thinks I'm an old grouse-pot, but I can't help it and I reckon I'll stop along of 'ee. Us can go to bed early with a hot brick."

Jessica bought two hot-water bottles and Mrs. Denefield's mild complaints ceased, particularly as from that time onwards any unaccountable noises in the flat ceased and only the more-or-less accountable ones remained and went unheard by the sleepers—the sound of the wind in the chimneys, little, explosive protests from the woodwork, the rumbling of wagons, and the clip-clopping of their dray horses taking produce in the very early hours to the covered market at the far eastern edge of the town.

As the days grew shorter the barge children had to be sent home earlier. For one thing, there was no lighting in the big schoolroom and, for another, the mists from the river made the crossing of the lock gates hazardous after dusk. The children, in spite of Jessica's orders that they must use the canal bridge, preferred to take the short cut, as she very well knew. She would have done the same at their age.

She had dismissed the school one wet and chilly afternoon when the attendance officer turned up. Jessica

was about to put on her hat and coat when he arrived. He was an oafish man whom she disliked, but his monthly visits were brief and were carried out as a matter of routine and not with any expectation that he would pull in any truants.

He walked into the school and found her in the little lobby where she kept her things. He said, "School's out early, then."

"Yes."

"Do the committee know?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Seems like perhaps they ought to be told, unless you and me can come to a little understanding."

"I don't know what you mean," said Jessica, picking up a large ink-can from which the children's inkwells were replenished. "Please go. I have nothing to report after what I told you the last time you called."

"Oh? What did you say? Go out into the highways and bring 'em in? Some hopes, my dear!"

"I don't care for your tone. Kindly address me as Miss Denefield and spare me your comments. Do you want me to report you for insolence? Please get out of my school. If, as you told me last time, you don't tackle bargees and you don't meddle with gypsies, there is no need for you to come here at all, is there?"

He looked at her appraisingly. She was a big, strong, country girl and her mouth was firm and obstinate. He eyed the ink-can and guessed that it was half full.

"OK, Miss Denefield, if that's the way you want it," he said, and took himself off.

The next visitor called at the flat. Jessica found him at the top of the outside stair when she and her mother returned from the Saturday shopping. The staircase ended at a small wooden platform and on this he had dumped what she thought was a bag of traveller's samples. She called up, "We don't need anything, thank you."

"I am not here to sell. I'm here to buy."

"We're not interested. There's nothing for you here."

He picked up his suitcase and came down.

"That's a nice piece you've got in the window," he said.
"Ought to be a pair, though. Got the other one somewhere?"

"No, we haven't."

"Know where it is?"

"No, we don't," said Jessica sharply, her colour rising as she told the lie.

"What'll you take for the one you've got?"

"It doesn't belong to us, so we can't sell it. There's nothing here for sale, I tell you."

"If I could come in and take a look around? I'll give you a good price for anything I fancy."

"There won't be anything." She mounted the steps with her shopping. Her mother followed, but not before she had said to the man, "Ent I seed 'ee some place afore?"

"No, madam." He picked up his suitcase and made off.

"Well," said Mrs. Denefield joining her daughter, who had just unlocked their door, "that's a funny thing, that is. I could swear I've seed him somewhere."

"Yes, there did seem to be something familiar about him. I expect you've passed him in the town on your way to your old lady and I on my way to school."

"No, I ent seed him yerabouts. What for didn't 'ee tell him the police have that other old candlestick?"

"I told him the truth, that I don't know where it is. That's quite enough for his sort. I want to forget about the police."

"They don't seem to have cotched that murderer."

"And, until they do, I'm still under suspicion, I suppose. You do realise that the Superintendent has got his eye on me, don't you?"

"Might as well have it on me as on 'ee. Nobody never asked me, but I know who that ooman was if her picture in the paper was anything to go by. I told mysen as it couldn't a-been. It was all that time ago, and her never demeanen herself by comen into kitchen."

"Oh, you're talking about Longwater Hall when you used to go there to help out. Forget it, mum. What would anybody you knew there be doing in a place like this?"

"Her had the candlesticks, didn't her, and kept 'em in the window?"

"Well, that proves nothing. The last time I saw them before I got my job at Miss Ware's school was in the window of that shop in Olquay. The man moved. He could have sold the griffins to anybody."

"Shop got brent down, didn't it?"

"But the griffins didn't. That shopkeeper was lucky not to be held on a charge of arson, you know. It was very strange that all the stock had been moved out before the fire started. It makes me think that the premises were insured, but the antiques weren't."

"Them sort of matters do dather I."

"I bet they wouldn't have confused the police in this part of the world, mum. Do you know what? Now I come to think about it, I wonder whether the man who came here just now was that antiques dealer. I was only in the shop once, but it wasn't all that long ago. I wonder what the griffins mean to him that he wants them back?"

"Got a customer for 'em, I reckon, but it were somebody else as he put me in mind of." As Mrs. Denefield said this, there was a knock on the door. It was the previous caller back again.

"Changed your mind?" he asked, producing a handful of money. "Thought it over?"

"If you don't go away and if you ever come here again I'll tell the police all I know about that business of yours at Olquay," said Jessica. "They are not too kind to aliens, you had better realise," she added warningly.

The man stared at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I only came to make you an offer. If you won't sell, fair

enough. I think you might tell me who you sold the other one to, though. I might be able to get on to him."

"I didn't sell it."

"There used to be two in your window."

"It wasn't my window then. Another woman lived here."

"Oh, her! French, I think. I made her an offer, too. Murdered, wasn't she? I saw the picture in the papers, but I was out of the country after that and forgot all about it. Now, name me a price."

"Look, do stop pestering. The candlesticks will never come together again. The police have the other one. She was murdered—hit on the head with it."

"Like hell she was!"

"I thought everybody knew that by this time. Now do please go away."

"Sorry you've been troubled."

The next visitor came to the school, but Jessica had been notified of her arrival. Once in every six weeks, on average, a woman member of the education committee came to the school to check the register. She called out a name or two at random and then signed to indicate that the register had been correctly kept.

The whole operation was over in a matter of minutes, for the visitor had a round of local schools on which to report, but this time she said, "Come with me a minute, Miss Denefield," and took Jessica into the vestibule out of earshot of the children. "You are going to have a visitor very shortly."

"Not another inspector already? The last one was an absolute crank."

"Oh, the one with the all-purpose stocking? I heard about him."

"He brought a long tube of knitting and wanted me to get the children to make similar tubes because these would do for anybody in the family from father to the baby, apparently. There was no turned heel. You just pulled the

tube on—he demonstrated on his own foot—and, as my mother would say, it fitted where it touched.”

“I know. There have been complaints that in some of our schools the girls giggled and the boys cheered. Most upsetting when one looks for a good report. I trust the children here did not forget themselves.”

“No, they remained stolid. I turned the incident to good account when he was gone, though.”

“You recommended this ridiculous stocking?”

“No. I asked the children whether they had noticed how beautifully clean his feet were. My brood may live *on* the water, but I should say that they are very seldom *in* it.”

“Yes, well, this visitor you are to expect is a certain Mrs. Lestrangle Bradley. She has a string of letters after her name and she is researching into the level of intelligence of gypsy children and barge children. She comes with the blessing of the Board, so we can’t deny her access.”

“So when do I expect her?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t want any special preparations made for her reception, but I just thought I would warn you.”

“Let’s hope there are some children present for her to study, then. Some days I don’t get anybody at all, as you know.”

Mrs. Bradley (later to become Dame Beatrice and psychiatric consultant to the Home Office) was a spare, small, upright, black-haired woman in, as Jessica guessed, her late fifties. Jessica became aware that the sharp black eyes took in everything, and that a razor-keen intelligence assessed what they saw. Jessica’s presence was then dispensed with while Mrs. Bradley talked to the children and when they were dismissed at twelve she invited Jessica out to lunch “if there is anywhere within distance. I have my car outside.”

Jessica was aware of this. She had seen it out of the window and had noted with some trepidation that it was

chauffeur-driven. Mrs. Bradley was obviously a person of substance unless the Board had supplied the car, but this she considered unlikely. The only people she knew with "company cars" were commercial travellers. Brought up in the shadow of the Hall at Longwater Sedge, Jessica was still in awe of people who owned their own car. They were out of her sphere. She regarded them as inhabitants of another planet and could not have foreseen the day when every school playground and every factory yard provided parking space for the working population.

"The children's dinner hour finishes at two," she said. "I like to be in a quarter of an hour before that."

"Admirable. I will tell George." George, the chauffeur, knew where to take them for lunch. They drove the whole length of the high street past the openings to numerous alleys, past the oldest church in the town, past the police station, the fire station, the offices of the local paper, past the gasworks and a little chapel-at-ease which was tucked away between the low-roofed offices and one of the great gasometers, and then, where the road broadened and the air seemed fresher, to the long wall which bordered the waterworks.

Beyond the waterworks there was a right-hand turning to a bridge across the river. Once over this, Jessica was in a different world. A long road bordered by trees went past beautiful houses with long front gardens. On the other side of the road was a great park guarded by a high wall spiked at the top.

"Who lives behind that formidable barrier, George?" asked Mrs. Bradley. Turning his head slightly, the chauffeur replied, "A certain Mr. Neville, madam. He bought the place five years ago when the earl had to sell in order to pay death duties."

"He knows how to keep himself to himself," said Jessica, eyeing the curved spiked railings at the top of the wall. The wall ended at the second set of gates they passed and,

beyond a rugby football field which adjoined the estate, the car entered a clean and pleasant town and pulled up outside a hotel.

Jessica enjoyed her lunch. She even, in a tentative, timid way—for the luxury of a meal in a good hotel had not come her way before—began to enjoy Mrs. Bradley's company. Without realising how she had come to do so, she found that she was telling her about Longwater Sedge, the children's party at the Hall, and what she knew of the subsequent history of the greenstone griffins.

"So what happened to them after the shop at Olquay was burned down?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"They continued their trail of destruction. At least, I used to think of them like that when I was younger."

"Interesting. Well, I think we had better be getting back if you intend to be in school at a quarter to two." On the homeward journey she said, "What did you mean when you said that the griffins continued their trail of destruction?"

"Somebody used one of them to commit another murder."

"So you still think the episode you mentioned, the death by shooting, was murder?"

"I'm not the only person to think so. Everybody was certain that poor young Mr. Ronald would never have run across like that when somebody was taking aim. It wasn't as though he didn't know about firearms and he and the other young man—the one who fired the shot—had quarrelled the night before."

"Over a game of chance?"

"No, it was about a girl, I think."

"So you don't know what happened to the griffins after the 'other murder' to which you have referred?"

"The police took one of them. They believed it to be the murder weapon; its base was covered in blood when I found it. As for the other one—" She hesitated.

"Ah, yes, they were a pair, of course."

"Yes, well, we've got the other one because the murder was committed in our flat. The griffin, of course, doesn't belong to us. It was the property of the dead woman, I suppose. I could—" Jessica, unaccustomed to wine with her lunch, was becoming what she called, later on, somewhat reckless. "We've got plenty of time. I could show you the flat, if you like. It's quite near my school."

"I should like that very much," said Mrs. Bradley. The alley, having been the entrance to the inn yard in the days of the horse-drawn coaches, easily accepted the width of the car. Beyond the archway Jessica and Mrs. Bradley got out. Jessica opened the door to the yard and they climbed the stair. The girl was surprised and worried to find the door to the flat unlocked. In the corridor they halted. There were sounds from above their heads.

"I think you have a visitor," said Mrs. Bradley.

"Could be my mother, but—no. She wouldn't venture up to the attic. Besides, she will still be at work."

"Go back to the car and summon George. Tell him to come in quietly." While she was waiting, Mrs. Bradley stepped a little way along the corridor and found the narrow stair to the attic. The corridor was covered with coconut matting. She pulled it aside, but there was nothing but floor-boarding at the foot of the attic stairs. She walked a few paces and tried again, for she knew that there must at one time have been access to the corridor from one if not both of the shops below.

There might, in fact, have been two staircases up from what were now the shops, a main stair which had been blocked off, probably near one end of the corridor, and a back stair for the servants which led directly up to the attic. Jessica's own access to the attic was by way of the staircase near which Mrs. Bradley was standing. It was not much more than a ladder with handrails and looked as though it had been constructed by a local carpenter. There was a door at the top of it which was kept shut for fear of the rats which

Jessica supposed were on the other side of it, but she had not yet had it nailed up.

Jessica came back with the chauffeur and, to her excitement and alarm, Mrs. Bradley produced a small automatic and, bidding the other two to remain where they were, she climbed the attic stairway and pushed open the door. The sounds from above were then replaced by voices, a rich contralto followed by a tenor squeaky with surprise and alarm.

Then down the attic stair came a man with his arms raised, followed by Mrs. Bradley and her little gun. George gripped the man and held him in a half-Nelson. Mrs. Bradley put away her lethal weapon and asked composedly, "Well, whom have we here?"

"Why, Mr. Bond!" exclaimed Jessica. "What on earth were you doing in my attic?"

"Searching for something, apparently," said Mrs. Bradley. "Attics are rich in junk."

"I heard a noise, like I told you before," said the shopkeeper. "Tell this feller to give over. He's hurting me. I never meant no harm. I was only investigating of the noise."

"Why didn't you wait until my mother got home and then told us both about the noise?" demanded Jessica.

"You spoke of rats and I thought I'd take a look to save you the trouble, that's all."

"You knew the flat would be empty, didn't you? You thought nobody would be here until tea-time. What other snooping have you been up to?"

"I been nowhere 'cepting the attic, and this is the first time. I swear it is."

"I don't believe you. You haven't been up there lately, until today, but we were always hearing you ferreting about when we first took over the flat, so much so that my mother and I were afraid to go up there and open the door."

"I swear it wasn't me. I on'y went up there this time because I heard noises. I ain't never been up there before."

"I can't believe that," said Jessica. "You told me that the staircase at your end was bricked up. That doesn't seem to be true, so why should I believe anything else you say?"

"The stairs *was* bricked up my end, but landlord give me a key to your front door while flat was empty. Why don't you ask next door what *he* bin up to? The other stairs come up from *his* shop, not mine."

"But he is not the person whom Miss Denefield has found trespassing," Mrs. Bradley pointed out. "I think, Mr.—Bond, is it?—I think, Mr. Bond, that you have put yourself entirely in the wrong over this matter."

"I on'y meant to be neighbourly," said the shopkeeper sullenly, "feeling sorry for two women on their own, like."

"You could have offered us your manly protection," said Jessica, "and we would have told you we can do without it. You had no right whatever to sneak into our attic and nose around when you thought we would be out. Anyway, I can and *shall* change the lock on my front door."

"I never come up 'til after the murder, I tell you, and then it was because of the noises and my wife being the nervous type."

Jessica glanced at her watch and said that she ought to be getting back for afternoon school.

"Do you intend to charge this man?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

"Charge him? Oh, no, I don't want any fuss. I don't suppose he meant any harm and if he *did*—well, I've got two independent witnesses, Mr. Bond, so I hope this is the last I see of you up here."

"All right, all right. I on'y meant to help. It's a bit dicey for women to live where there's been a murder."

Jessica was reminded of her first visit to the flat, the time when she had had the horrifying experience of finding the bloodstained griffin and the dead body.

"No," she thought, as Bond disappeared, "I don't think you're the one who told me people usually walked into the

flat without knocking. More likely to have been the greengrocer next door."

George drove her and Mrs. Bradley back to the school. It was almost two o'clock by the timepiece high up on the toffee factory just beyond the canal bridge. The hour struck as Jessica got out of the car. One or two sad-eyed children, who looked like subjects out of a painting by Murillo, were standing in the school doorway. Jessica opened up for them and then turned to bid goodbye to Mrs. Bradley.

"Oh, I'm inclined to spend the afternoon with you," said the visitor, with a reptilian smile. "I have some games and puzzles for the children. These ridiculous gadgets do not involve you and me in participation, so, when I have handed them out, you and I will remove ourselves from the battlefield and return later to pick up the casualties."

"Leave the children to themselves, you mean?"

"Is the committing of mayhem a probability if we do?"

"No, but they'll help each other and cheat off each other."

"Two typical human reactions to every situation and both are necessary to my project. How soon can you be free to talk to me?"

"As soon as I've called the register and waited a bit for any late-comers before I fill in my total. I always have to allow a quarter of an hour or so. If there are any jobs to do on the barges, the children can't always get to school on time. That they come at all is a bonus for me. My numbers are carefully scrutinised up at the office."

When Jessica indicated that all those who could be expected were in attendance, Mrs. Bradley made her brief explanations, handed out paper, drawings, and fretwork shapes and Jessica provided coloured chinks. Then, at Mrs. Bradley's insistence, the two of them retired to a room which had been used as a receiving office before the building had been converted for use as a school and here they settled in front of a small coal fire which was kept laid

but used only when an inspector or other important visitor called. Mrs. Bradley put routine questions about the children, their background, their standard of attainment compared with the children Jessica had taught in her last school, and other such run-of-the-mill matters and Jessica answered lucidly and with composure. Then Mrs. Bradley put away her notebook and said pleasantly,

"And now you are going to tell me a lot more about the greenstone griffins."

"I don't think there is any more to tell. I told you about them at lunch and I can't add anything else. They have nothing to do with school, anyway."

"In a sense, they have a good deal to do with school, I think. How comes it that a bright young woman like you is tied down to what must be an unrewarding task?"

"It's only an unrewarding task from a professional point of view. I mean, educationally one doesn't seem to get anywhere because the children are here today, gone tomorrow, and I find that very frustrating. On the other hand, although they're reserved and suspicious, I believe I get on with them well and I never have parents up to the school to complain."

"That is all very well. All the same, this place is a professional backwater and a girl of your age and (from what I hear) your abilities, has no business to be here."

"I didn't choose it. It was the murder and all the publicity. The education committee thought they had better hide me under the counter for a bit. I would apply for a job under another authority, but I don't want to go into digs again because I have my mother to think of. The flat is too big and it's creepy, but at least we have a home there and can please ourselves what we do."

"Mr. Bond was also pleasing himself about what he did. I wonder what he was looking for in your attic?"

"Well, not rats," said Jessica, "but I don't think we shall have any more trouble with Bond. I shall go on buying stuff

at his shop as though nothing had happened.”

““A Daniel come to judgment!”” said Mrs. Bradley. “And now I think you had better tell me everything.”

“I thought I had.”

“Then let us go over it all again. I wonder why your mother thought she had seen that man before?”

“The man who wanted to buy the griffin? I don’t know, but I also thought he looked familiar.”

PART TWO

Mrs. Lestrangle Bradley

9

Preliminaries

"I have to express my gratitude to you and your committee," said Mrs. Bradley, "for allowing me to visit your school for the canal-boat children. Most interesting and instructive. I was surprised to find the teacher-in-charge so young, but she appears to be doing good work, especially as the scope for her activities and enthusiasm is so limited. Did she apply for the post? She cannot have been long out of college. One would have supposed that she would have opted for a post which would give her the opportunity of serving under a wise and capable head teacher."

"Yes, well, hers is perhaps an exceptional case. Her original appointment was to the town school, but there were reasons why we had to transfer her."

"Dear me! She struck me as a most promising recruit to the teaching profession."

"Oh, I am sure she is." The education officer hesitated and then capitulated before the challenge in Mrs. Bradley's sharp black eyes. "The reason we transferred her," he said, "was that she did a very foolish and rather discreditable thing and brought us some extremely undesirable publicity. She broke into premises where she had no right to be and was unlucky enough to discover the victim of an atrocious murder."

"Poor girl! What a terrible shock that must have been to her."

“Well, yes, of course, but then she had to make a public appearance at the inquest and admit that she had entered the premises uninvited. It was all very unpleasant for us and for the school and very bad for the children, who, of course, got to hear about it. I am sure we did what we could for her in giving her the Barge School. It even includes a slight increase in salary. Some authorities might have demanded her resignation. Unfortunately the repercussions are still to come. The police have not made an arrest yet, but, when they do, the whole wretched business will crop up again and we shall have to reconsider Miss Denefield’s future because she will have to give evidence at the trial. It is not a position we should desire for any of our teachers, particularly as Miss Denefield may find herself very seriously in trouble.”

“You cannot mean that she may find herself in the dock? But that is unthinkable!”

“Apparently she was desirous of enquiring about some object she had seen in the dead woman’s window and was told by a man whom she cannot identify that people who wished to see the tenant walked in. It sounds a very thin story to me.”

“Thin stories are often true. In my profession we tend to distrust the highly embroidered, detailed, carefully worked-out account. The bald, improbable tale is apt to indicate innocence and a welcome lack of sophistication on the part of the narrator.”

“She had no business to enter somebody else’s flat when she had never so much as met the tenant, let alone received an invitation to visit her.”

“Ah, well, she is paying for her temerity. She has been deprived of a post she liked and in which, I understand, she was doing good work and has been relegated to what, to a young teacher, must appear to be a wilderness.”

“The Barge School is a social necessity.”

“I do not doubt it, but you must admit that it would be better filled by a mature woman with motherly instincts and

no ambition for promotion. It is a stultifying position for a young and promising girl."

"She is lucky to have a post at all. She is not yet free of the police and that is certainly not what we expect of our teachers," the education officer reiterated.

"What of your town councillors? Are they under less suspicion than is this girl?"

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"I have information that some of them visited the flat for the alleged purpose of having their fortunes told."

"Alleged?"

"Certainly 'alleged.' It is not readily conceivable that sober, responsible citizens should have visited the flat with such a purpose in mind. I wonder why they went?"

"What, madam, are you insinuating?"

"That, when it comes to the point, others besides Jessica Denefield, found the door unbarred when they visited the flat."

"What I think you are suggesting is monstrous!"

"And what, exactly, do you suppose I *am* suggesting?"

"Well, I—well, I—well, really!"

"Yes, really. I will tell you what I surmise. There could be three reasons, apart from having their fortunes told—and I have made it clear what I think about *that*—for their visits to the woman in the flat. They were being blackmailed by her, or they were in collusion with her over some form of illegality, or they went to visit her for what are known—erroneously, in my opinion—as immoral purposes. I leave you to make your choice."

"Preposterous and scandalous!"

"Neither. I would suggest that I am being completely reasonable. As for scandal, that lies in their relationship, whatever form it took, with the dead woman. I suggest that you should be reasonable, too. I have nothing against any member of the town council except that he must be very

foolish if he thought that his clandestine visits to the flat would pass unobserved."

"Who would observe them?—that is, if they ever took place."

"They were observed from the shops on the other side of the high street."

"But—I mean, even supposing you are right, which I do not admit—anybody visiting the flat would have done so, presumably, in the evening, when the shops were shut."

"Oh, my dear Education Officer! The sitting-rooms of those shops are on the first floor. Curtains can be drawn aside, you know, and town councillors recognised. Moreover, they are not always the most popular figures in urban society. I wonder what is the rateable value of those high street shops and how recently the rates were raised? Small shopkeepers brood upon these things."

"You hit below the belt, Mrs. Bradley."

"But I am not playing by Queensberry rules (although those were not formulated by the Marquess himself, I believe). I am a little incensed that an innocent girl should be punished for a foolish act which had been perpetrated time and again by mature men. I refer only, of course, to walking into the flat, not what may have happened when they were inside it."

"Ah, you are a feminist!"

"No. If most of life's ironies and jests were directed against men, I would be on *their* side, but we must not waste your time and mine on fruitless discussion of nature's ruthless disregard of the importance of the balance of power between the sexes—at least so far as human beings are concerned. I believe the female spider is more fortunate."

"Look here, you won't spread these rumours about illegal dealings and blackmail and the rest of it all over the place, will you?"

"Rumour has a gossiping tongue and I am no gossip."

"I can't reinstate Miss Denefield while the police are still interested in her."

"I appreciate that, of course. I also appreciate that, so long as she is tucked away in the Barge School, you and your committee can wash your hands of her. That must be very convenient for you all."

"Don't hit a man when he's down!"

"I should not stoop to such a proceeding. When a man is down, that is the time to kick his head in, don't you think?—and that action does not involve any stooping at all, as your committee appears to have realised in the case of Jessica Denefield."

"I read about the case, of course," said Ferdinand, Mrs. Bradley's lawyer son. "So you are taking up the cudgels on behalf of this girl."

"Not at all. I am no crusader. The case interests me from the psychological angle. The girl seems to be obsessed by a pair of greenstone griffins to which she attributes supernatural power to work evil. She connects them with the deaths of an old lady and a young man, conflagration at a shop, and now this murder."

"Is the girl mad?"

"By no means. She is lonely and imaginative. She is an only child and, except at school, had no associates of her own age until she was at least nine years old. She is reasonably intelligent and was doing well as a teacher in what I believe was a well-run school until she was unlucky enough to come upon this dead body, murdered, and the murder weapon was one of the greenstone griffins."

"Looks bad for the girl if she had some sort of fixation on the things."

"I am very much afraid that is what the police are going to think if, indeed, they do not think it already."

“Crime is always interesting and you have certainly had some success in solving more than one mysterious murder. Here’s power to your elbow, but watch your step, won’t you? I have only one mamma and I wouldn’t like to see her liquidated by some plug-ugly in an obscure riverside town. Remember that, according to the account I read, the dead woman’s head was smashed in. I suppose you can trust this girl?”

“Miss Denefield is a tall, strong child,” said Mrs. Bradley, with an alligator’s mirthless grin. “Oh, yes, I shall exercise care and discretion. You may be sure of that. A fractured skull would not improve my appearance.”

Her first foray was in the village of Longwater Sedge, the grass-roots from which Jessica’s adventures had stemmed. It was difficult to associate it with the girl’s story. Everything except the river appeared to have changed. The school building itself had remained untouched, but a large hall which served the school as an assembly room and gymnasium, and the parish for meetings and festivities, had been built alongside it; and what had been the school field was now given over to four huts used as extra classrooms.

The village, which had been a collection of cottages on crossroads, now extended in the form of hideous modern houses to accommodate a population which must have expanded considerably since Jessica’s childhood. The reason was immediately apparent. Light industry had come to the village with the consequent influx of dozens of workers, all of whom had to be housed.

The church, which was in a lane adjacent to the school, remained untouched, but the old vicarage was now a surgery and had been taken over by two doctors. The new vicarage was a six-roomed modern house on two floors with a view from one window of woodlands and another prospect which afforded a glimpse of a bend in the river.

From the village Mrs. Bradley drove to what had been the Hall. It had been turned into flats and was approached

by a curved gravel drive aggressively new and brash, with half a dozen lock-up garages where the greenhouses had been.

Only the river remained unchanged, but even here Jessica's description would no longer hold, for the river-keeper's cottage was forlorn and neglected and what had been the riverside path to the stone bridge was now so overgrown as to be unusable.

Mrs. Bradley returned to where she had left her car and chauffeur and drove up to the front door of the Hall. Here, as she had anticipated, there was a caretaker. She asked whether there was a flat to let.

"The last I heard was that this was a private house," she said chattily, as the old man conducted her up the main staircase. "How long has it been turned into flats?"

"A matter of five years," he replied. "Supply and demand, you see."

"Oh, really? In what way?"

"We got a factory in the village now and the nobs that run it didn't see the fun of comen in from London every day. Waste of time and money, I reckon. Well, the Hall was empty—had been for years—and was goen cheap. Had two owners after the squire, but one went broke and t'other died and left two darters and neether them nor their husbands wanted it, so they put it on the market and no takers 'til this syndicate of gentlemen come along and bought it and done it up into flats for theirselves and put me in as caretaker."

"Did you know the squire?"

"Ah, I did, and his son, Mr. Ronald, too."

"Didn't he inherit the property?"

"No. The poor young gentleman got shot accidental. By his best friend, too."

Mrs. Bradley waited hopefully, wondering whether she was going to get a different picture of the shooting from the one which Jessica had given her, but the old man tramped stolidly on up the stairs. They passed the first- and then the

second-floor landing and ascended to the top storey. Here he unlocked a door and said, "Well, this is it."

"Isn't there a lift? I couldn't walk up all those stairs every time I wanted to get to my rooms."

"No, there ent a lift. You'd have it all to yourself up here, though. This be the only flat on this floor. All the rest is baggage rooms and the cistern room and all that."

"And the cistern is noisy, of course."

"Ah, maybe, but the rent is very reasonable."

"Yes, it would have to be." She looked at the small window, the slope of the ceiling and, through an open communicating door, into the room beyond and shook her head. "I don't think this is what I am looking for," she said.

"There be a grand old view from the winder." He went over to it and Mrs. Bradley followed. The view was beautiful and extensive. She pointed away to her right.

"Who lives at the mill?" she asked.

"Timberson did. His missus have it now."

"Have they been there long? I have met a young woman named Jessica Denefield who used to live in a cottage near here. It was because of her that I came to look over this place. She used to visit the mill when she was a child."

"Little Jessica? Oh, ah, I remember her. Father was one of the gardeners in squire's time, but had ideas and moved away. I reckon he seed more'n he were meant to, when Mr. Ronnie got shot."

"You mentioned that. How did it happen?"

"Nobody don't rightly know. Two on 'em, Mr. Ronald and his friend, skylarken around some young ooman, I heard tell. Any road, it quite broke up squire and then his missus died and he sold up and went to foreign parts and nobody ent heard nothen of him since, poor old gentleman."

"Truly a gothick tale. You say that little Jessica's father was a gardener here. Who looks after the garden now?"

"It's under contract to a firm in the town. There's a lot of feelen about it in the village. Jobs, you see. It's all right for them factory hands, but they be mostly foreigners."

"Foreigners?"

"All as ent born in the village be foreigners in these parts."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"So them as be native thought as how it were their perks to have any jobs as was goen up at the Hall, but, so fur, I be the on'y lucky one. Do 'ee want to take a look at the garden while you'm here?"

There was nothing Mrs. Bradley wanted more, and she was glad that the suggestion had come from him, so that she did not need to make it herself. They descended the narrow and then the wide staircase and he led the way to a long corridor which Jessica would have recognised.

At the end of it there was a door, half of glass and half of wood, which opened on to a terrace stone-flagged and with a balustrade of stone. A short flight of steps led down to the lawn where were three fine cedars.

To her right, Mrs. Bradley could see a wooden door and she descended the steps and walked towards it. It was unfastened and she found herself in what had been the walled garden. The espaliers had been removed. The beds were now given over to autumn plants of the cottage-garden variety, some still in flower. A little summerhouse had been built at the far end of the walled garden and in approaching it Mrs. Bradley passed the door through which Jessica's father had come from the kitchen garden proper into the walled garden on the morning of Ronald Havant's death.

The kitchen garden itself had been transformed into a water garden. There was a pool in the centre of it with goldfish and water-lilies. There was a clump of bulrushes at one corner, lush, tall reeds at the others, and there were

benches of teak on all four sides of the pool. On one of them a woman of early middle age was seated.

"What windows are those?" Mrs. Bradley asked, indicating two which overlooked the pool. The caretaker, who had followed her, replied that they had been the kitchen windows in the old days.

"Now them be *my* winders," he said. "They give me the kitchen and the butler's pantry to meself. They goes with the job. Besides the caretaken and acten as porter when needed, I does the stairs and the corridors and any odd jobs as the residents 'ull pay me for."

"Were you in service with the family in the old days?"

"Not to say service. That's for indoor staff. I were head groom with stable lads under me, but, of course, there ent no horses no more."

Mrs. Bradley walked all round the lily pond and, in doing so, passed the teak bench on which the pale, tired-looking woman was seated.

"One of the tenants, I suppose?" she said, when she rejoined the caretaker, who was standing at the doorway which led from the walled garden.

"A Mrs. Martock," he informed her. "Only bin here a matter of weeks, but seemenly her knowed the Hall from the old days. Did use to be a house-guest in Mr. Havant's time afore poor Mr. Ronald got shot. She don't know as I reckernise her. Don't suppose she ever noticed me about the place, since she didn't ride."

"So you introduced yourself, no doubt, and spoke of the old days."

"No, not I. There's things as is best forgot. In them days I don't think she was married, but I never knowed much about her, her not haven no need of a horse."

"So how did you recognise her if she never came to the stables?"

"One of the stable lads p'inted her out to me as she passed the stables to get to Mr. Ronald's motor-car. He said,

'Master Ronnie be sweet on that bit of stuff.' I said, 'Mr. Ronald to you, sonny,' and clipped his ear for be-en saucy about his betters, but I ent let on to Mrs. Martock as I reckernised her when she come to the flats and rented one on 'em and I be certain as her didn't reckernise me neether."

Mrs. Bradley looked across at the windows on the opposite side of the garden.

"You must have a very pleasant outlook in the summer," she said.

"All right if it wasn't for them dratted squitters. Swarm over that water, 'em do."

They returned to the terrace. Mrs. Bradley tipped the caretaker and asked the way to the mill. He not only gave directions, but accompanied her to the car and repeated them to George. He stood and watched the car as it took the semicircular drive back on to the road, regretful that so open-handed a lady was not, so far as he could tell, destined to be one of his tenants.

Before he reached the front door, however, the car came back and Mrs. Bradley got out. He heard the sound of the vehicle, turned, and went to meet her.

"What did you say was the name of the woman in the water garden?" she asked.

"A Mrs. Martock, ma'am. Had the last flat as was goen 'cepten for the one as I showed 'ee. Widow-ooman, I reckon, as don't seem no sign of an 'usband. Quiet like, her be. Sets about or takes hersen off for walks. Nursen her grief, p'raps."

"I wonder what persuaded her to come here?"

"Well, her ben here before, like I told 'ee and, well, it be kind o' peaceful, ent it? Or maybe—" He chuckled and did not complete the sentence.

"Maybe?" said Mrs. Bradley.

"Not all my gentlemen tenants be married men. That was my meanen, ma'am."

Mrs. Bradley changed the subject by asking, "Who is the vicar here?"

"Reverend Cornish, ma'am. Old vicarage be took over by two doctors. Noo vicarage be a nice little house just afore 'ee gets to the school."

"Oh, yes, I saw it as I came through."

"I don't sit under him."

"You are a nonconformist?"

"I am, when he preach as all men be equal. Not in these parts they ent, as old squire would have been quick enough to tell him. 'In that station o' life to which it hath pleased God to call me.' That's Prayer Book, that is, and it don't say nothen about equality, do it?"

"If you were here in the squire's time, you must have heard something about a terrible accident—a garden fire, I believe—in which a woman died."

"I were stableman, not head groom, in them days. Ah, turrible it were, too an' all. Old lady by the name of Mrs. Stone. Onlucky I reckon that family was, 'cos it were her grandson as shot poor Mr. Ronnie. Both deaths was accident, o' course. The old lady was buried here in our churchyard under the name of Rosetta—Rosetta Stone. One of my gentlemen here, what I acts as caretaker for, he see the grave one day and he says to me, 'No need for you to go to the British Museum,' he says. 'You got the genuine article right here in the village.' I didn't ask him what he meant. Gentlemen will have their little joke, won't 'em?"

10

The Miller's Widow

When the caretaker went round the side of the house to return to his own quarters, he found that Mrs. Martock was still seated on her teak bench in the water garden.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"A Mrs. Bradley, ma'am, come to look over number seventeen."

"Is she going to take it? She looked ugly but interesting. That was a marvellous car. I saw it as I came back from my walk. By the look of it, I shouldn't think that attic flat would suit her, would it?"

"I think she was disappointed with it, ma'am."

"What did she want out here if she wasn't going to take the flat?"

"Just poken about, I reckon, ma'am."

"Does she know this is where the accident happened?"

"I shouldn't hardly think a stranger would be interested, ma'am, and of course I don't make no mention of it when I has one of the flats to let," said the caretaker diplomatically.

"No, I suppose not. Oh, well, the truth will come out some day, I suppose, although hardly with the help of that snake-headed woman. Is she anybody?"

"Not as I knows on, ma'am. Got money, though, I reckon."

"Well, the car gave that impression, as I said."

The car in question was proceeding at a decorous rate along a road not much wider than a lane. It came to a bridge, crossed it, and turned left down an even narrower road. Here it pulled up at a gate which George got out and opened, and the car stopped in front of the mill house. The figure which approached the Georgian door would not have impressed the miller's wife, but the large car and the uniformed chauffeur who opened the rear door so respectfully for the passenger, impressed her so much that, when Mrs. Bradley knocked, the mistress of the mill said to the little maidservant, "I'll go."

For her own part, Mrs. Bradley had been somewhat surprised, as the car had turned on to the lane which led directly to the mill, to observe a large notice advertising farmhouse teas. It hardly fitted in with Jessica's account of visits to the mill with her aunt, but there were explanations to come. The welcome at the Georgian front door began them.

"Oh, please come in, ma'am. It's only teas I do as a general rule, but it won't take a minute to get you a pot of tea and a scone. Perhaps the gentleman in uniform would like I should send something out to him when I have you settled and served."

Accepting the situation on its merits and abandoning the reasons she had prepared to give for calling at the mill, Mrs. Bradley followed the miller's wife along a central passage and into a room which overlooked a small orchard.

The room was well furnished and scrupulously clean, and there was a wood fire in the grate. Given a chair at a gate-legged table on which the miller's wife spread a spotless, beautifully laundered cloth, Mrs. Bradley gazed out of the window at the denuded trees and the grey autumn sky. Her hostess returned with tea, scones, butter, and jam and informed her that "the girl" was attending to "the gentleman in the car."

"I need a girl," the miller's wife explained, seating herself by the fire prepared for conversation. "I have two lodgers since my husband died, so I need the help."

"Is the mill no longer operative?"

"Nor has been these six years since Timberson was taken. The water got low since they started stealing so much out from us for the new waterworks at Acres, so my husband, since he had to be took, was taken at a good time. Anyway, there wasn't much of a living here for us in the end, it on'y be-en animal feed, and all that, the last years afore he went. All the grain goed to the big mill at Horlock."

"But you manage quite well, I see," said Mrs. Bradley, looking around the comfortable room.

"Near enough. Of course the teas is only summer trade, but my husband was a warm man and thrifty. I get along all right, although I take in the lodgers to help out."

"Things appear to have changed a good deal since the owner of the Hall sold up."

"Yes, indeed, poor gentleman. Lost his lady wife the year after Mr. Ronnie was killed. He couldn't abide the house no more."

"Killed? In a road accident?" asked the visitor, with seeming innocence.

"No, not on the roads and there was speculation as it wasn't no accident."

"Oh, dear!"

"Don't misunderstand me. Crowner's verdict stood, but there was trouble over a young lady, and squire allus thought there was a quarrel and Mr. Ronnie shot dead in his own kitchen garden. I went to crowner's court and there was a lot of empty talk, but it was brought in as accident and I must say as the young gentleman who fired the shot seemed proper cut up and remorseful, but that didn't bring poor Mr. Ronnie back."

"Were there no witnesses to the accident?"

"Oh, they put one or two men in the box, but nobody 'cept the young gentleman who done it actually seed it done and he swore his Bible oath as Mr. Ronnie run across just as he loosed off his gun. I wonder if the young lady could have told another tale, but she was taken too bad with the shock of it to be put up in court."

"Did you yourself form any opinion? You saw the witnesses and heard what was said."

"No. What the gentry gets up to is no business of mine. Mind you, there was some loose talk down at the Cow and Lasher. Bill Scally had a tale to tell and got a tidy few beers on the strength of it, but Mr. Bell, as was clerk to Mr. Strange-ways, as is lawyer in Olquay, told him he'd better hold his tongue."

"So what did Bill Scally surmise?"

"Told 'em down at the Cow—that was afore Mr. Bell warned him—as one of the maids down to the Hall, Maisie Touch be name, she had been watchen out of kitchen winder and she said Mr. Ronnie never run across at all. He was standen at the walled-garden side of kitchen garden when it happened and Mr. Stone never loosed off that gun as killed Mr. Ronnie."

"Wasn't the maid called as a witness?"

"Nobody never took no notice of Maisie Touch. Besides, her never told nobody 'cepten Bill and he told her to keep her mouth shut and not get herself mixed up in matters as she'd got no onderstanden of. Just as well, if you arst me, for she was that simple as she would have bamboozled everythen and on'y made a worse mizzlement than there was already. And then Bill has to talk in his cups. Good thing nobody believed what Maisie said, and Bill he never repeated it no more."

"I was told that the Hall has been turned into flats. What happened to the servants when the squire left?"

"Got give a bit of money and found other jobs. Squire done his best for 'em, 'tis said."

"The gardeners and grooms too?"

"The head gardener was pensioned off and one of the others, whose little gal used to visit here with her auntie as was married to the river-keeper, him and his wife and little Jess they tooken theirselves off London way, so I year. Always did have ideas above his station, did Denefield, along of his wife be-en own sister to the child's auntie, I suppose. He was worken in the walled garden when the shooten was goen on, but he reckoned he never see nothen as he could speak to, a long brick wall be-en atween him and the two young gentlemen."

"As a matter of fact, I have just come from the Hall, but there was only one flat to be disposed of and I did not care for it. Most of the tenants appeared to be out, but I did see a woman who was seated on a bench in what I am told used to be the kitchen garden."

"That 'ud be poor Mrs. Martock. She was supposed to be very sweet on Mr. Ronnie at one time. She stayed on with the squire and his lady for a bit and then went away. Now she's got one of the flats and 'tis said she ent too right in the yead and spends time wanderen down by the river talken to herself, and I did hear say as she was like to drownd herself because her have one of these ideas as the truth'll come out some day about how poor Mr. Ronnie come to his death, but when that be knowed for sure, us all reckons she'll die in the place where he died, be-en more seemly, like."

"Was she a bone of contention between the two young men?"

"She was sister to the one as shot Mr. Ronnie, but I *did* hear as there was more to it than that, but it all go a long way back."

"How interesting it all is."

"I never could ravel out the rights and wrongs of it, liven so far from the Hall and minden my own business and not be-en on what you might call visiten terms with hardly

nobody, most on 'em be-en, as you will onderstand, below my station in life and iggorant with it."

"Oh, quite, where would society be without its class distinctions? What happened to Bill Scally's Maisie Touch? You did mention some girl called Maisie Touch, I think."

"Vicar's wife took pity on her and she went to the vicarage 'til vicar died and his wife went to live with her sister. Maisie was a willen worker—that I will say—but that thick as she never knowed how many beans made five."

"I deduce that she is no longer in vicarage service, but she knew something concerning Mr. Ronald's death, you tell me, and, except for confiding in Bill Scally, told nobody what it was. Did anything come of his talk in the public house?"

"Seemenly not. I reckon he acted careful after he was told pretty sharp to hold his tongue."

"Did he—does he still live in the village?"

"He do now. Used to work at the smithy along of old Jack Merrow, but Jack had to turn him off on account of a once-a-day bus what took the place of the wagonette, and the farmers goen over to machinery which Jack never could get the hang of if anythen goed wrong with it, and the plough horses goen and the squire's stables shutten down. There wasn't enough work at the smithy for two men when all that come about."

"Is Jack still at the smithy?"

"No. Sold it long enough ago. 'Tis a garridge now. Jack went to his sister in Wales, I did year. Bill Scally is a bad lot, anyway. You know, poachen and stealen. None of the village girls would have him—made sure he'd end up in trouble, which he did, a fortnight inside he got. Although the lads liked him well enough, I believe, admired him, I daresay. You know how foolish boys be."

The vicar himself came to the front door. He was an elderly man with a lopsided smile which went upwards on the right

side of his clean-shaven face and correspondingly downwards on the left side.

"Ah," he said, "you have come about the flowers, no doubt. How kind you ladies are."

"No, I have come upon a less kindly but perhaps a more important errand."

"Come in, come in. Do sit down. What can I do for you?"

"I hardly know. I have been along to what was the Hall, only to find that it has been turned into flats. The caretaker could not tell me where the previous owner is to be found."

"Did you know him?"

"No. I represent a young woman named Denefield, who met him when she was a child."

"I am sorry, but the name means nothing to me. I have held the living only for the past few months. My health broke down and good friends secured this very pleasant post for me. We have had an encouraging influx of new blood, I am glad to say, with the expansion of the village population since light industry came to the area, although, regrettably, very few of the new people come to church except for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and the harvest festival. Still, they turn up at jumble sales and the church bazaar, so we must be thankful for small mercies. Denefield, you say? Did she live in the village?"

"Not in the village itself; her parents had a cottage near the Hall, where her father was one of the gardeners."

"I could look her up in the parish register, if that would help you."

"I could not think of troubling you because I do not think it would help me at all. She told me of a fatality which took place at the Hall when she was a small girl and she seems not to be the only person who has grave doubts about the verdict given at the inquest."

"Oh, that!" His urbanity faded and so did his engaging, quizzical smile. "It is very strange that you should call here today. Yesterday morning I received an anonymous letter

which could possibly refer to your errand. It is not the usual abusive or threatening kind of thing which (like all my brethren, I suppose) I have received on sundry occasions. It is mysterious, not offensive. Of course, although I have been incumbent here for so short a time, I have heard about the matter you mention. The memories of countryfolk are very long ones and you might be surprised—oh, well, no, you would not, or you would not be visiting me today—”

“Surprised that feelings about the untimely death of the young man they called Mr. Ronald still run strongly? This would apply only to the older members of your flock, I suppose. Mr. Ronald was killed a matter of thirteen or fourteen years ago, as I understand it.”

“Some of my parishioners were children at the time, but heard their parents discussing the matter. There appear to have been grave doubts as to whether the death was accidental, as you say. May I ask what this Miss Denefield had to do with it?”

“Nothing. Her father was one of the witnesses at the inquest, that is all.”

“Then I fail to see—”

“Another death has taken place and there is no argument about this one. It is undoubtedly murder and Miss Denefield, although I am certain in my own mind that she is a completely innocent party, is deeply involved. I got to know her purely by chance when I visited the school at which she teaches, but I am anxious to help her. The police are holding their fire, but I foresee that she may very well be charged with a crime she did not commit.” She handed him her professional card. The vicar read it and nodded. Then he produced the anonymous letter. It ran:

Dear Reverend,

You will not know me as I do not go to church much, but I have it on my conscience to send you the enclosed as I found among some stuff as I regret to say I half inched

from the old vicarage while it laid empty before the agents took over to try and sell it. No need to ask what else I took, it was all a long time ago, but the enclosed looks a bit hot to handle because I read as there has been another murder. No need for me to sign my name as am going straight now and have done no time for years.

The enclosure ran:

"I am dying, Egypt, dying." (*Anthony and Cleopatra* Act IV). The documents deposited with me are not under the seal of the Confessional, but I have given my word that their seals shall not be broken unless some innocent party is accused. This seems unlikely now, but the papers are in safe keeping. They relate to the death of Ronald Havant and I regard them as a sacred trust. I do not care to leave them "to him who shall succeed me in my pilgrimage" (*John Bunyan*, Mr. Valiant-for-Truth loquitur), so have given instructions regarding them, remembering, as I have always done, that "there is One Lawgiver Who is able to save and to destroy. Who art thou who judgest another?" (*James* 4 v. 12). Keep faith with me and with the penitent Cain.

The paper was initialled but not signed. Dame Beatrice handed back both sheets and asked, "Shall you attempt to identify your correspondent?"

"Not I, but, from what you say, the documents he mentions may have some importance in the near future and ought to be traced."

"'Dying, Egypt, dying.' Did your predecessor leave a widow?"

"Yes, he did. I hear from her occasionally. She went to live with her sister, a Mrs. Beaumaris, who is also widowed. I

have the address and I believe they are on the telephone, but the number does not appear on the correspondence. The previous incumbent's widow, Mrs. Welland, is an invalid and no doubt does not wish to be called on the telephone or want to trouble her sister to answer it on her behalf, but it is possible to contact them, if the matter is urgent."

He wrote the name Beaumaris and the address on a slip of paper. Mrs. Bradley thanked him and then asked whether his anonymous letter had come by post.

"No," he replied. "It was pushed through my letterbox unstamped and unpostmarked. I am sure it came from somebody in the village. I am pretty sure it came from a reformed rascal named Scally."

"Well, it is good of you to have given up your time to answer my queries," said Mrs. Bradley. She took her leave and told George to drive to a post office where she consulted a telephone directory. As Beaumaris was an unusual surname, she found it very easily, rang up, and asked for an appointment, quoting her credentials and stating that her errand had to do with parish business at Longwater Sedge.

The voice at the other end was dubious.

"Well, I don't know. I doubt whether my sister took all that much interest. I don't think there is any way in which she can help you. Hang on a minute, please, and I'll call her to the phone."

The next voice was higher pitched and sounded like that of an older person.

"Mrs. Welland speaking," it said.

"I wondered whether I might call and have a word with you in connection with some papers your late husband had in his possession."

"I wouldn't know anything about that. The present incumbent must have them if they were connected with parish business."

"They may be required by the law. That is my reason for asking whether I may call on you."

"Oh, dear! I couldn't get myself mixed up with the police!"

"The papers could not possibly involve you. They may be needed as evidence, that is all."

"I see. Well, you had better come round, but I'm sure I can't help you. I have been a semi-invalid for years and my poor health gave me little opportunity to immerse myself in the affairs of the parish in the way I would like to have done."

"May I come tomorrow? I shall not detain you for very long."

"I suppose we might as well get it over. I retire immediately after lunch, so about half-past eleven is the best time."

It was a pleasant, unpretentious little house, one of half a dozen of various sizes and styles which faced the village green and the war memorial. Behind it was a rounded hill and between the hill and the houses the perpendicular tower of the village church rose high above the rooftops. The door of the house was opened by a middle-aged woman in a sweater and trousers who greeted the visitor with delight.

"I *thought* it must be!" she said. "Do come in. I attended that series of lectures on ESP you gave in London last winter. I didn't understand a word, but I *did* enjoy them. They lasted the W.I. here for weeks, debating what on earth you had been talking about."

With this dubious but apparently well-intentioned tribute, she led the way to a room where, lying back in a long chair, was a much older woman. Mrs. Bradley, who was a fully qualified medical practitioner as well as a psychiatrist, summed her up with a professional eye. This was no hypochondriac, but a very sick woman. She made to

get up, but Mrs. Bradley said, "Please don't move. I won't keep you long."

11

The Late Vicar's Wife

"This is *the* Mrs. Bradley," said Mrs. Beaumaris. "I told you I went to a series of lectures she gave in London."

"Oh, yes, of course." Mrs. Welland looked enquiringly at the visitor.

"I have come from Longwater Sedge," said Mrs. Bradley. "I had a most interesting time there and it has raised some equally interesting queries. I have great hopes for enlightenment from you."

"Oh, dear! I doubt very much whether I can help you."

"I expect, though, that you knew Mr. Havant and his son Ronald."

"Mrs. Havant called on me now and again, and before I was ill my husband and I dined at the Hall once or twice."

"I will come to the point. The present incumbent has received an anonymous letter enclosing another which is merely initialled, but the writer I think you may be able to identify, since there is a strong probability, judging by the internal evidence, that the note was written by your husband."

"My husband would never have stooped to the writing of anonymous letters."

"This letter is initialled C.M.W. and was intended to be left in trust to you, I fancy. If I read it to you—I dotted it down in my own form of hieroglyphics—I think you would see that there was really no necessity for a signature.

Unfortunately the document or documents which it was supposed to cover may be in such safe keeping that, without the help which I am hoping you can give me, I cannot recover them. There is the chance that they may have been stolen or destroyed."

"Why do you need them? I think the lawyers were told to get rid of any parish redundancies."

"I hope that *necessity*, as such, will not enter into the matter, but I am looking for anything which might help me to save an innocent person from being had up in court on a very serious charge. I believe they may contain a confession of guilt. You dined at the Hall once or twice, you tell me. It is a gracious house. It seems a pity to have turned it into flats."

"Yes," said Mrs. Beaumaris, "we heard they had done that. Still, there was no real heir. Young Ronald had died unmarried, and there does not seem to have been anybody else except a distant cousin, so, unless it was entailed, I expect the squire was glad to sell up and get the money. He is still alive, so far as we know."

"Did you hear any rumours concerning Ronald's death?"

"Rumours?" exclaimed Mrs. Welland. "Good gracious me, if a village vicarage concerned itself with *rumours*—"

"Straws show which way the wind blows."

"So do clouds, I suppose, and they are the most unreliable of guides. They drift across the sky regardless of our needs when the fields need rain, and then flood the countryside when the last thing the rivers need is more water."

"That reminds me. I paid a short visit to the mill at Longwater Sedge."

"My husband thought that woman was a snob and a gossip."

"I had hoped she would give me some information concerning the squire's household prior to Mr. Ronald's death, but little was forthcoming."

"I don't suppose she knew anything which was not common gossip. The housekeeper would not have visited at the mill. Even if she had done so, she would never have dreamed of discussing the squire's family business. This housekeeper came to tea once a month with us, and she visited a sister in Oxford when she took her annual holiday, otherwise I do not believe she ever left the Hall. The butler was a married man and had a family living in the village, but they left when the squire sold up and I believe he got a situation at a house in London."

"Would that be the man who gave evidence at the inquest on Mr. Ronald?"

"Yes, Parsons is the name."

"Then there is the cook."

"Mrs. Jevons? I believe she was quite friendly with a woman called Denefield who used to help out at the Hall. She was fond of little Jessica, Mrs. Denefield's daughter. I doubt whether she even knew the people at the mill, let alone visited them. It is a long way from the Hall by road and even if one takes the riverside path it is rough walking and hardly to be contemplated by somebody whose work keeps her so much on her feet."

"In spite of your disability, you appear to have been able to acquire a considerable amount of information about these people, and I am most grateful to you."

"My husband was my chief informant, of course. Although during much of my married life there was little active help I could give him, we discussed any problems which arose in the parish and I was sometimes present when the villagers came to the vicarage with their troubles."

"Marital ones, no doubt."

"Oh, those, of course, although most of that kind of thing preceded marriage. (I refer to illegitimate pregnancies.) My husband usually had sufficient influence to make the young man stand by his obligations if the girl could name her seducer. Sometimes, of course, she could

not. It is quite extraordinary to me how promiscuous some of these girls are. Then, of course, there was the usual crop of incestuous births. Those were more difficult to deal with, since it was often impossible to convince the father or the brother of the girl that he and the woman had sinned. I remember one old farmer saying to my husband, 'Well, my old woman's past it, so what's wrong with carrying on the breed with a daughter? Us does it all the time with the animals.'"

"Did your husband point out to the man that by getting his daughter with child he was lessening her chances of finding a husband?"

"Well, in the case of the farmer, that did not apply. He offered to leave the farm to a suitable applicant for his daughter's hand and was able, with the girl's help, to make his choice among several eligible young men. The baby, you see, turned out to be a son who would inherit the farm later on. I suppose everything boils down to a question of economics in the long run. But your errand? Have I really told you anything you wanted to know? We began by mentioning anonymous letters and a document which I think has been destroyed if it contained a confession of guilt. Such things can be very dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands. However, he would have mentioned anything of that sort and we would have discussed it together, I'm sure."

"There appear to have been reasons which made that impossible. Your husband must have received the document under the seal of absolute secrecy. All the same, it seems to me that it is time the seal was broken, since your husband is no longer bound by his promise. I am very anxious to trace the confession, if it still exists."

"If it does, it will be at the bank or with the lawyers. I can give you the addresses. How can I help you further?"

"By telling me something about the terrible accident which happened when Ronald Havant was a little boy."

"A little boy? You are not referring to the shooting fatality, then?"

"Not this time. I refer to something which may have happened as long as thirty years ago."

"Thirty years? Christopher would only just about have been appointed to Longwater Sedge at that time. I remember thinking what a vast old barracks the vicarage was. I hear there is a new, much more convenient house, for the incumbent now, but that was never our luck. Still, I was younger and healthier then, so we made do. But what is the incident you mentioned?"

"The death in a summerhouse fire of a young or an elderly woman (accounts vary) who was either a guest or a servant at the Hall."

"Oh, that! Yes, it must have been a terrible business, but I was very ill at the time and my husband took care that I should hear as little about it as possible. It would have made no difference. I had to hear rumours about the fire, of course, but by the time I was better all the excitement had died down and young Ronald was at a new boarding-school."

"I wonder whom I could find to tell me the whole story?"

"There were only rumours to go on, and it was more than anybody's place was worth to repeat them so that the squire got to hear of it, but it's all been over for a good many years now, so it doesn't matter my telling you what I heard. It was an *old* woman who died."

"So you do know the story?"

"Come to that, you seem to have heard it, too."

"My interest in the case began with a chance meeting with Jessica Denefield, whose father of course gave evidence at the inquest on Ronald Havant. If the woman was elderly and infirm, I suppose she was overcome by smoke too soon to be able to shout long enough to get help."

"There was a horrid story that it was much worse than that. One of the servants had been sent to the summerhouse with an extra cushion for the old lady's back and he found her and Ronnie playing a game in which the old lady was tied to her chair while Ronnie, with a box of matches and in a head-dress of feathers, was playing Red Indians who had captured a Paleface who was going to be burned at the stake. When the accident happened and the summerhouse, tinder-dry in the summer heat, was set on fire (accidentally, of course; the child was not a monster), Ronnie must have panicked. Instead of freeing the old lady, he ran away, terrified by what he had done."

"That, perhaps, is what was mentioned in the confession to which your husband seems to refer, and it is indeed a dreadful story. Who was the old lady?"

"Just a house-guest, I imagine."

"I must not trouble you further. Thank you for talking to me. You mentioned a box of matches, but I was told that candles came into it somewhere."

"Candles? Oh, I should hardly think so. Where would a young boy acquire candles? The Hall, I am sure, was lighted by gas, as the vicarage was. The villagers used candles and oil lamps, but not the Hall. Ronald had simply been playing with matches, as children will."

"You never heard of two greenstone griffins made in the form of candle-holders?"

"No, I never did. Oh, wait a minute, though. I said I had not visited the Hall since I became too ill to go to dinner-parties, but my husband dined there, now and again, and I believe he did mention the things. They were put on the dining-table, I suppose, but I am sure Ronnie would never have been allowed to take them out to the summerhouse. They must have been quite valuable."

"And if they had been in the summerhouse when it caught fire they would bear some traces, no doubt, and nothing has been reported about that."

Mrs. Beaumaris showed Mrs. Bradley out. She had remained in the room during the whole of the conversation, keeping an anxious eye on her sister. When she and Mrs. Bradley reached the front door, she said, "I used to visit my sister and brother-in-law at Longwater Sedge. I heard that dreadful story from him. There were two other children staying in the house at the time, but the boy was indoors resting a sprained ankle and his sister was keeping him company, so they had no part whatever in the Red Indian game."

"And the boy with the sprained ankle would be of about the same age as Ronald, I suppose. Was there any connection between that boy and the old lady?"

"I have some vague impression that she was somebody's grandmother or she may have been Ronald's old nurse or something like that, but I really don't remember. I didn't live in the place and I heard the story a long time afterwards."

"Forgive me for asking, but has your sister seen a specialist?"

"Yes. There's no hope. It is just a matter of time. She knows and is not only resigned but says she will be glad when it is all over. She is, of course, a deeply religious woman and has no fear of the future, either in this world or any other. I am glad you came. You have given her something to think about and talk about."

"One of these days there will be transplants to alleviate conditions such as hers."

"I don't think she would want that. She longs to join her husband. Her continuing regret is that she could give him so little help in the parish. By the way, you mentioned some documents. Are they very important to you?"

"I think they may contain a confession of murder."

"Good heavens! By whom?"

"Speculation is idle, but, as they might possibly save an innocent person from trial and subsequent imprisonment,

you will appreciate their importance. Mrs. Welland mentioned a bank and a lawyer."

"Christopher banked in Olquay with Cowley's. Here, wait a minute!" Leaving Mrs. Bradley in the hall, she went back to the room they had both vacated. Mrs. Bradley seated herself on a small bench which had an umbrella-stand at one side of it and waited for what she hoped was coming. She was not disappointed. After a little time Mrs. Beaumaris returned bearing a foolscap envelope which she handed over with the remark, "Your authorisation to take possession of any papers which my brother-in-law may have deposited at the bank or with the lawyers. Both know my sister's signature and will accommodate you on the strength of it, she is sure. All the same, I'm afraid you can take it for granted that any confession of guilt no longer exists. However, you have done my sister the world of good. She is looking quite animated and is full of curiosity as to what was in the documents."

"I shall keep in touch with you. I need not tell you not to allow her to over-excite herself. All my information—that is, of course, if I obtain any—I will relay through you and leave you to give her as much of it as is suitable."

Before Mrs. Bradley could pass out at the front door, the thin voice of the sick woman came from the open doorway of the room in which the short interview had taken place.

"If Mrs. Bradley hasn't gone—"

"No, she hasn't. Do you want to speak to her again?" They returned to join the invalid. "What is it, dear?"

"The letter my husband left. I never saw it. Was it really meant for me?"

"I assume it was intended for you, although no name was written down." Mrs. Bradley took out her notebook and read the letter aloud. Mrs. Welland shook her head. "I was in hospital when he died," she said. "That letter must have got itself collected up with other things. It never came to me, as you can see. I should love to have the original."

"And so you shall, when I have traced the other documents. I am inclined to think that your husband wanted the confession retained in a safe place, but not read by you because you might have felt bound to act on it and he had pledged his word that no action would be taken on the strength of it except in very special circumstances. So far as I can see, those circumstances would only arise if another suspicious death, connected in some way with the first, should follow."

"And you think it *has* followed?" said the invalid.

"I have my suspicions, but little to go on. However, now that I have seen the kitchen garden at Longwater Hall, my suspicions have received a certain degree of support. I was very anxious to take a look to test a theory which I had formed."

"To what extent the kitchen garden is overlooked from the kitchen itself, I suppose. You know, this is really getting quite exciting. It opens up all kinds of possibilities."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bradley, noting the flushed face and over-bright eyes, and deciding that the excitement had gone far enough for one day. "Well, I will let you know how I get on."

"You'll come again, won't you?"

"Yes, of course." Again she was escorted to the front door and this time there was no call from the room she and Mrs. Beaumaris had left. After lunching on the way, she drove back to the new vicarage at Longwater Sedge. The vicar did not appear to be in the least surprised to see her.

"You have been to see Mrs. Beaumaris," he said. Mrs. Bradley admitted it and showed him the authorisation which she had received from Mrs. Welland.

"I shall show this at the bank and to the late Mr. Welland's lawyers," she said. "Meanwhile, I wonder whether you would be willing to let Mrs. Welland have her husband's letter? I know she will treasure it and, after all, it is her property."

"Of course." He produced it and the covering letter which had come with it. "The whole thing has nothing to do with me and I shall be glad to wash my hands of it. However, just as a precaution—not that I doubt you or your good intentions—perhaps you would address the envelope and leave me to post it." He produced a writing pad, an envelope, and a stamp. Mrs. Bradley wrote a short note of explanation, addressed the envelope to Mrs. Welland, inserted the enclosures, stuck on the stamp, and handed the envelope to him with the remark that she appreciated businesslike measures. He rang the bell and handed the envelope to the maid who answered it.

"Post this at once," he said. "Never mind what else you should be doing." He turned back to Mrs. Bradley. "Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"No, thank you. My purpose must be to find this man called Bill Scally."

"Enquiry at the Cow may help you there, but they will be closed for the afternoon by now, I am afraid."

"I am hoping that Scally can lead me to a girl—a middle-aged woman by now, I suppose—called Maisie Touch."

"He can show you her grave, that is all. She was drowned in the river some weeks ago. It was my first funeral after my arrival here."

"I suppose there was an inquest?"

"Oh, yes. The verdict was accidental death. She was an extremely simple-minded woman, I am told, but she had been drinking at the Cow and Lasher in celebration of her birthday or something of the sort, and elected to take a short cut home by way of the wooden cattle-bridge. It is thought she lost her footing and tumbled into the water in the dark."

"I have spoken to the woman at the mill, but she did not mention anything of the kind. Surely she knew of the

accident? The cattle-bridge is not all that far from the mill house."

"Strange that she did not refer to it, for I believe Maisie Touch was actually in her employment at the time."

"Was she indeed? Well, many thanks for your help. I am sure Mrs. Welland will be more than pleased to get her husband's letter." She went straight back to the mill. This time it was the little maidservant who answered the door.

"Is your mistress in?"

"Oh, yes, mum. Us be doen the bedrooms. I'll fetch her, but us don't do nothen but teas."

The miller's widow did not wait to be summoned. She was half-way down the stairs as the girl closed the front door.

"Did 'ee leave somethen behind 'ee, like?" she asked.

"No, no. I have learned from the vicar that Maisie Touch used to work here."

"And soft in the yead she was, too, poor thing. Wasn't hardly worth the wages I give her, though she was right willen, I'll say that again."

"You did not tell me that she was employed here and was returning to the mill at the time of her death, let alone that she had been drowned."

"I perfers to forget Maisie Touch. That were a cruel enden, that were. I don't want to think about it."

"I can understand that, but I have my own reasons for being interested in her."

"You ent police, be 'ee?"

"I am not altogether unconnected with an enquiry which is being pursued."

"Then, if 'ee'll excuse me, I ent sayen no more, but, if anybody think as Maisie Touch walked off that there cattle-bridge accidental, they can think again."

"I am told she was drunk at the time."

"Drunk? Don't you believe it! Her didn't have no money to get drunk on. Used to go down to the Cow on her evenen

off, I daresay, and earn herself a half-pint be goen round collecten up the dirty glasses for landlord, but that 'ud be her lot. Even a simpleton like her couldn't get drunk on one half-pint."

"Perhaps someone treated her. Is that impossible?"

"Her never tumbled off of that bridge accidental and that's what all on us thinks, crowner or no crowner, ma'am."

"So is anybody suspected of having caused her death?—anybody in particular, I mean."

"Nobody ent talken. Don't do, when 'ee can't prove nothen. 'Twould be a police matter and nobody don't want that. If Maisie had keeped her mouth shut, her 'ud have ben all right. 'Tent nobody else's business, as I can see."

As his widow had prophesied, Mrs. Bradley's visits to the late vicar's bank and his lawyers did not produce the confession of murder or anything else which was of any use.

12

At the Cow and Lasher

Because of what she had learned at Longwater Sedge, there was no doubt in Mrs. Bradley's mind that there had been a witness to Ronald Havant's death and that that witness was now dead. It remained to be seen whether Bill Scally, who appeared to have heard the story from Maisie Touch, would be prepared to talk. She decided that the next day would be time enough to confront him, so when she got back to the Stone House in which she lived she asked George the chauffeur whether he would be willing to make enquiries for her at the Cow and Lasher.

George was accustomed to being her emissary on such errands as involved enquiries in pubs and received his instructions with what passed for him as enthusiasm. That is to say, he saluted respectfully and said that, while she had been visiting the vicar, he had learned from a passing native that the Cow and Lasher was to be recommended for its snacks and its beer.

"Then you must sample both," said Mrs. Bradley, "and, if Mr. Scally is not among the customers at the time, perhaps you can ingratiate yourself sufficiently with the barmaid or the landlord to enable you to obtain Scally's address. I have good reason to believe that he still resides in the village. A letter which I am reasonably sure came from him was delivered by hand at the vicarage."

"If I should encounter the man himself, madam?"

“Try to steer the conversation on to the death by drowning—accidental, according to the verdict given at the inquest—of a woman named Maisie Touch. Do not push him for the information, but I hardly need to tell you that. He may deny ever having known the woman if he receives the impression that there is more than ordinary interest in his story, but I have some evidence that he not only knew her, but that she had confided in him to the extent of giving him certain information which could be of value to me.”

“Very good, madam. Should the midday session at the hostelry prove non-productive, would you wish me to try again in the evening?”

“Oh, yes, certainly. During the afternoon, whether you need to return to the inn or not, perhaps you would have a word with the caretaker at the Hall. Tell him that, if there is ever a more suitable flat to let than the one I inspected, I should be glad to know. Then, if you can, steer the conversation to one of the flat-dwellers named Martock—Mrs. Martock. You might find an opening by mentioning the river and asking whether it is dangerous to cross by the cattle-bridge, as you have heard of a drowning fatality which happened a few weeks ago. This might lead to information about Mrs. Martock, who appears to spend time wandering along the waterside.”

“Do I go in livery or sub rosa, madam?”

“Oh, go in mufti, but take the car, of course.”

“With respect, madam, it would be better if I hired from the garage near the village. Your car will be recognised. At the Hall this would not matter, but the part I propose to play at the Cow and Lasher would not accord with the possession of a Rolls Royce.”

“You think of everything, George. May I enquire—?”

“Oh, certainly, madam. I think a fairly seedy newspaper reporter in quest of a story would be a suitable role for me to play. I think I can sustain the part quite adequately and

people expect a newspaper man to ask questions and take an interest in local affairs."

"Splendid. I have a suspicion that the drowning of Maisie Touch was not as accidental as the coroner's jury appeared to think, but, of course, you will not allow any hint of that opinion to colour your conversation at the Cow and Lasher."

"Is there any way in which I can identify this man Scally, madam?"

"No, George. I can give you no description of him at all. All I can tell you is that he should be middle-aged by now. He has been in prison, but only, I think, for minor offences. If, in your character of seedy reporter, you should mention Maisie Touch and vague rumours that her death could have been suicide, you may be lucky enough to have Scally pointed out to you. Your errand is a shot in the dark, so far as I am concerned, and may well fail to score, but there is just a chance that you may be able to turn up something which will be of use to me in my real objective, which is to clear Miss Jessica Denefield of any further involvement with the police. I may also be enabled to unmask a murderer."

By a quarter-past one the public bar at the Cow and Lasher was full. Judging by the scraps of conversation which filtered his way as he ate a very good home-made meat pasty which he had ordered together with a pint of draught bitter, George gathered that the majority of the customers worked at the local factory. They were of all ages, from young men in their early twenties to veterans who were nearing the age of retirement.

Most of the men remained at the bar with their drinks, but the half a dozen small tables soon became occupied. They filled up with those who had ordered snacks and wanted somewhere to sit while they consumed them. George, in the quiet time which had preceded the influx of

factory workers, had had his table to himself, but soon he was joined by three men. Two of them appeared to be father and son. The third man asked, with pub politeness, "These seats took, mate?"

"No, no." George replied. "Help yourself." The courtesies having been observed, all four champed stolidly, leaving the beer untouched until they had eaten. When the pasties were finished, the young man took a swig at his beer, screwed up the paper serviette which had served him as a plate, and went to the bar, whence he returned with two puff-pastry cakes crowned with swirls of coconut. He himself consumed both of them and then the father and son finished their beer and left the table. The bar began to empty, but the man who had spoken to George appeared to be in no hurry to leave. He nodded towards the door through which the two men had disappeared.

"Got to get home to their dinner," he said. "Old woman's a tartar if they're late when it's her day for the pictures in Olquay. Get in cheap if her can make it afore three. Saves for it out of what them two gives her, so she don't want to throw her money about. I'm lucky. I ent got no old gal no more."

"Nor I," said George. "Went all of ten years ago."

"Walked out on yer?"

"No. Got herself drowned. Walked into the Thames off Strand-on-the-Green and couldn't swim. I always thought somebody gave her a push, but I couldn't prove it and didn't much want to. Gave me the hell of a life," said George, rounding off this flight of fancy. "I reckon she'd got it coming to her."

"There's some as thought the same here, when Maisie Touch was drowned. Bill Scally, he allus thought so, and when he was lit he said so. Wasn't you with your missus when she—well, like you said—"

"No. I do a lot of night-work, so I didn't see much of her in the evenings."

"Night watchman?"

"No, newspaper man."

"Pay much? I've heard as them newspapers is run by millionaires."

"You wouldn't know it if you worked for them. Give you just enough to keep the wolf from the door, that's all," said George, verbally jettisoning the handsome wage paid him by Mrs. Bradley. "Talking of wolves"—he folded his serviette and placed it near the ashtray—"good grub, that. Home-made, I suppose?"

"Landlord's a lucky man. Her used to be cook up at the Hall. Married into the pub when landlord's wife died, not long after squire left the Hall."

"This Bill Scally, would he give me a story?"

"If you paid him. Sell his grandmother for a fiver, that one would."

"Where do I find him?"

"Happen you won't, without you drops in here again about seven. Bill goes mumpen with an old donkey and a barrer. Old clo'es, bottles, bits of iron, jam-jars—any old clobber as he can get hold of."

"Oh, a rag-and-bone man."

"That's Mondays, Toosdays, and Fridays. Other days he does bits of gardenen 'cepten Saturdays. Saturdays he does the bumby holes with a couple of others. Used to be once a month, but now, with the factory, it's every week."

"He seems to be a busy man."

"Been goen straight for years, and it don't pay so well, I reckon, as the poachen and thieven used to, but he give up them sort of capers when Mr. Ronald up at the Hall died."

"Can I get you another pint?"

"No, I'm orf. I'll have it tonight if you're droppen in again."

As he had plenty of time on his hands, George decided to drive into the nearest town and use a public telephone there, rather than at the Longwater Sedge post office. He

wanted to let Mrs. Bradley know of his progress so far. She professed herself delighted with the information he gave her and congratulated him.

"I shall be on my way to the Hall when I leave here, madam, and then I shall drop in at the Cow and Lasher again this evening in the hope of encountering Scally."

The caretaker at the Hall recognised him at once.

"I don't never forget a face," he said, leading the way to the kitchen quarters as though he was glad of company. "I see you got your own car today and is out of livery. Your day off, p'raps?"

"Sort of, but I've come here to oblige. My lady would be glad if you would let her know if there's ever a flat to let better than the only one you were able to show her."

"Got an address for me to write to?"

"You're on the phone here, aren't you?"

"Oh, Lord, yes, but the calls is mostly for the tenants."

"Well, here's Mrs. Bradley's number."

"Thanks. Not as I knows of anybody likely to vaycate at present, but I'll bear her in mind."

"Well, that's all I came for," said George untruthfully, searching his own mind to find a convincing way of introducing the subject of Mrs. Martock. The problem was solved by the appearance of the lady herself. George did not know her by sight, but the caretaker said, as she burst into the kitchen, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Martock. Anything I can do?"

"Who's this?"

"I am chauffeur and handyman to Mrs. Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, madam."

"Sounds a mouthful. Who is she?"

"Difficult to particularise, madam. Apart from her name, which most people would know—"

"How can anybody know anything, stuck in a place like this? What does she do?"

"She is a practising psychiatrist, I believe, madam, and holds all the doctorates I've ever heard of except that of Doctor of Divinity."

"You're being impudent."

"No, only as accurate in answering your question as is within my capabilities, madam."

"A psychiatrist, you say. Might be a good idea for me to meet her."

"You *have* met her, in a manner of speaking, Mrs. Martock, ma'am," said the caretaker. "Her and me passed you the other day when you was setten by the water-lily pond."

"Oh, you don't mean that small, spare woman in that awful coat and skirt?"

"That might be one description, ma'am."

"So she knows this place?"

"She was enquiring about a flat here, ma'am, as I believes I told 'ee."

"Why would she want to live in a dead and alive hole like this?"

"To study village life and customs," said George, "and to wonder why a woman walked into the river and got drowned," he added boldly.

"Oh, I heard something about that. The women cleaners were full of it. The woman was feeble-minded (and drunk at that) and the bridge she chose to cross by was unfenced. It was her own doing that she lurched and went over the edge."

"Something more shocking was suggested to me in the village, madam," said George.

"Oh, they must have their spice of drama. It's a long time since they had anything important to wag their tongues about."

"The installation of a factory in the village, perhaps, madam. That, in a time of recession such as is following on a dozen years or so after the Great War, must have pleased the people here."

"I couldn't say. I suppose the factory is a good thing, but I believe it is American owned and run. I referred to a tragedy, not to a matter for rejoicing. Can your employer really minister to a mind like mine? Can she explain to me 'such an act . . . as takes off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love and sets a blister there'? He was shot in the head, you know." With this, she went quickly out of the room and the two men could hear her running up the stairs.

"Poor lady," said George. "I wish she would ask you for Mrs. Bradley's address."

He went for his tea to the mill. The miller's wife was not in and he was attended to by the young maidservant. She also recognised him.

"You be on your own, then?" she said.

"My day off. Liked it here and thought I'd have another look at the river. Is it all right to cross by that wooden plank arrangement a bit upstream from here?"

"The cattle-bridge? Yes, that's all right, long as 'ee don't fall in."

"Fall in? It looks pretty wide. Has anybody ever fallen in from it, then?"

"Only poor Maisie Touch and, if you arst me, I'd say did she fall or was she pushed?"

"No, honestly? You're joking."

"I ent joken, then. Nor I ent the on'y one as think so. They sez as how she was drunk and tumbled in on her way back to the mill here, but I've heard my dad say as there have bin some funny goens on up to the Hall in the old days afore squire left, and Maisie knowed a thing or two as her didn't ought to have spoke about."

"That wouldn't have been about an accident, would it? I know the caretaker at the Hall flats and he said something

about somebody getting shot.”

“I was on’y a little toddler at the time. It was years ago. I heard my dad and my grandad talken, and that’s all I know.”

“Didn’t they think it was an accident, then?”

“Said it were a funny sort of old business, but as to the rights and wrongs, well, I don’t bother my yead. All the same, I don’t never cross the cattle-bridge no more. Better safe nor sorry, that be what I says, short cut or no short cut.”

George paid for his tea, left the girl a small tip, and returned to the river bank. He walked along it as far as the cattle-bridge and then retraced his steps to where he had left the hired car. It was already getting dark along the river and an autumn mist was settling in. He drove around until a quarter to seven and then pulled up at the Cow and Lasher. It was already being patronised, but his acquaintance of the morning was not there. He ordered a pint and chatted up the barmaid. Customers drifted in, so he took his tankard to one of the tables and wondered how to find out whether one of the men present was Bill Scally.

A darts match was organised. Four players took part and George was alert to catch any names which might be mentioned, but none of them was Bill. Then a party of three came in, a man and two girls. George took out the notebook he had brought as an aid to his impersonation of a newspaper reporter and began to jot down some notes on the way he was spending his day, but he kept his ears open and gave an occasional glance around at the three. He heard the young man order drinks, a pint, a half-pint, and a pink gin. Surreptitiously he watched proceedings. The three seated themselves at an adjacent table. One girl had been given the half-pint of draught beer, the other, who had seated herself very close to the young man, got the pink gin.

George sized up the situation with an experienced eye. From their appearance the girls must be sisters, he decided. One was the young man's young woman, the other was an unwanted passenger. Deliberately he caught her eye and made a slight gesture. The pink gin and the pint disappeared fairly quickly and the young man picked up the empty glasses and went to the bar. The girl followed him, obeying a sign and a whisper from the sister. As soon as the other two had left the table, the supernumerary picked up what was left of her half-pint and came over to join George.

"Evening," she said. "I'm dee tropp over there. Mind if I set along of you?"

"Delighted, miss."

"Writen your bit o' po'try?"

"No. I'm a journalist."

"What's that, when it's at home?"

"Newspaper reporter. Wouldn't a spot of mother's ruin help that beer down?"

"Well, thanks, Don't mind if I do."

The other two returned to their table. George went to the bar and ordered a double gin.

"I can't imagine you being de trop anywhere, miss, if I may say so," he said gallantly, when he came back with it.

"Oh, my bloke will be in presently, I daresay. What do you report about? Murders and that?"

"No such luck. That's for the big dailies. I was sent down here to get a story from Bill Scally."

"He won't tell 'ee nothen without you makes it worth his while. Do 'ee know him?"

"No, not even by sight, but I was told he knew the girl who committed suicide here a few weeks ago. My paper is running a series on the prevalence of suicides in village communities."

"Fancy that! But that wasn't no suicide."

"Accident? Oh, dear! That won't help me, will it?"

The girl swallowed the last of her beer and said, "I couldn't say, I'm sure, and I bent one to speak out of turn, but there's bin a lot of talk since it happened. Well, that's Bill Scally, him in the duffel coat, if 'ee wants to speak to him."

"Will you excuse me, then, miss? I won't be a minute."

"I got nothing out of Scally except a few inappropriate words for which the barmaid quite rightly rebuked him, madam, and a threat to blacken my eye," said George, reporting to Mrs. Bradley on the following morning. "Judging it impolitic to provoke a fracas in a public house, I left as soon as I could and waited in the car for Scally to emerge, hoping that he would be alone. I had to wait a long time before he came out of the bar and then he was so drunk that it seemed useless to expect a coherent story from him, but I followed him home on foot and have noted his address, should you desire me to pursue the matter."

13

Indoor Servants

“So you accosted him a second time, George?”

“I did indeed, madam, but he was singing and only paused in his vocal efforts to consign me to my ultimate destination, about which I can only hope he was mistaken. I even showed him a five-pound note which he attempted to snatch, but he fell over, got up cursing, and then staggered off with a renewal of the song, the lyric of which was bawdy in the extreme.”

“Oh, you could have done nothing with a man in his condition. How did you spend the rest of your day?”

“Very pleasantly and not perhaps totally unproductively, madam.” He gave an account of his activities. Mrs. Bradley nodded approvingly.

“So village opinion, so far as you have heard it expressed and of which I myself have some slight evidence, is that Maisie Touch was not the victim of an accident,” she said. “One must allow for the human lust for sensationalism, of course, but, even so, I doubt whether we need trouble Mr. Scally again.”

“The doubts I heard expressed came from very different sources, and that is always a valuable pointer to veracity, madam.”

“I shall return to Longwater Sedge in due course. The woman who was cook to Mr. Havant’s household has married the landlord of the Cow and Lasher, you tell me.

Thank you, George. You have done extremely well. My fears now are for the personal safety of the man Scally. I wonder to what extent Maisie Touch threw discretion (if she had any) to the winds and again took him into her confidence? If she did, I think he may be in as great danger as she herself seems to have been."

"If I may say so, madam, it did not strike me that he would be any great loss to society."

When George had left her, Mrs. Bradley went to her library and settled down at her desk. Her secretary, busy with accounts at her own desk, looked across enquiringly, but Mrs. Bradley said that, when the accounts were done, there was nothing else which needed attention on that or the following day.

"So amuse yourself as you will, Miss Cummings," she said. "I am going down to Longwater Sedge again."

"I have had several extra days off lately," said Miss Cummings. "Are you sure you would not like me to accompany you? There might be notes to take."

"I will take them myself. There is no need for you to return until tomorrow evening if you have anywhere to spend the night. In view of your approaching marriage, I daresay you would like to travel to town and see as much of your fiancé as possible."

"My sister runs the YWCA in the London borough of Clerkstone. I am sure she would put me up."

"And has he found to sleep in, A better bed than mine?" quoted Mrs. Bradley, regarding the earnest young woman with benign affection.

"I intend to go unspotted to my nuptial couch," said Miss Cummings, with the turn of speech which so delighted her employer.

"Yes, I agree," said the latter, with a crocodile grin. "Measles and chickenpox are hardly to be recommended as the introduction to a honeymoon."

"That is not what I meant," said Miss Cummings, with dignity, "as I am sure you know. However, I am very grateful for your kindness. It is not misplaced and, I trust, not undeserved."

"I shall miss you when you leave me."

"The regret is mutual. Did you wish me to reply to the letter from Miss Denefield?"

"No, I'll see to it myself. Tell George to drive you to the station tomorrow."

"I don't like you mixing yourself up with all these murders," said Miss Cummings abruptly.

"Would you deny me my simple pleasures? Off you go, my dear. Have as good a time as your conscience and the circumstances permit."

Jessica had written, "The police have been questioning me again. They still don't accuse me openly of anything, but I am sure they believe I killed that woman in this flat. What ought I to do? It is getting frightening and they are not as polite as they were at first."

Neither the Barge School nor Jessica's flat was on the telephone, so, on her way to Longwater Sedge, Mrs. Bradley told George to stop at a post office. There she sent a telegram:

Do not worry be with you soon Bradley.

Then she went on to the Cow and Lasher, having lunched on the way, to find, as she had anticipated, that the bar was closed for the afternoon.

In the ordinary course of events, there is nothing more difficult than to get into an English pub during closing hours. The Irish solution, "having the appearance of a woman who had knocked at a back door," served Mrs. Bradley well, however. Her confident hammering produced a belligerent landlord.

"So what?" he demanded. "We're closed."

"But not to a visitor who is desirous of bringing a message to your wife from Jessica Denefield."

"Denefield?" He turned his head and called out, "You there, Carrie? Come along here a minute. You got a visitor, a lady."

"Well, ask her in, then," said a woman who appeared from a doorway. "Who is it?"

The host made way and Mrs. Bradley replied, "A friend of Jessica Denefield. I am to remember her to you."

"Little Jessica? Well, to think of that, now! Come in and sit you down. What's all this about Jessica and a murder? We read it in the papers and couldn't hardly take it in."

"I am not surprised that you found it difficult to conceive of her in such circumstances."

"To think of her getting herself mixed up in a thing like that! Mind you, I never did take to that mamselle."

"That—?"

"Madame Ortonse she called herself. Lady's maid she was to Miss Stone and only came to the Hall once, but, though she's older now, I couldn't help but recognise her picture in the paper, the nasty little bit of jumped-up dirt. I don't wonder she got herself murdered."

"You met her when you were cook at Longwater Hall, then?"

"That's right, and we read as how poor little Jessica found her body. Mrs. Denefield used to come along at busy times and help out up at the Hall and many's the good bowl of soup and a cream cake and fruit jelly as I'd give her to take home to the little one. I was real fond of that child. Seems to have done well, too. Very bright, she was, but quiet with it. It's a shame she had to get her name in the papers like that."

"Well, under the circumstances, her name could hardly be kept out of the papers. However, I bring you her kindest regards and remembrances," said Mrs. Bradley, making a

mental note to tell Jessica to embody this fiction in a letter so as to establish it as fact.

"She must have gone up in the world even more than we thought, if you be a friend of hers," observed the ex-cook, eyeing the well-spoken visitor with respect.

"I became acquainted with her quite recently and am greatly interested in her."

"Because of the murder? Newspaper lady be you?"

"No, I am an educationist of sorts. I met her at her school and am very anxious to help her. The police are not being very kind where she is concerned. It was very unfortunate for her that she had to become so notorious."

"I'd help her too and all, if I knowed how."

"You may have helped her already and more than you realise."

"How's that, then?"

"You have established a connection between the murdered woman and Longwater Hall. You could help Jessica further, I think, if you would be willing to give me your version of what happened on the day of Ronald Havant's death. Any detail, even the least significant, may be of use in my investigations."

"As to that—the shooten, I mean—I can't really speak. It was a great shock to us, of course, and messed up everything, his poor mother dying like that, and squire selling up and going to live in France, and nobody to inherit and all the domestics and the grooms and the gardeners throwed out of work 'til they found themselves other places."

"You appear to have found yourself a very pleasant place," said Mrs. Bradley, looking around the over-furnished but cosy room.

"I was one of the lucky ones. That blown-up bit of French finery told me I would be."

"She told your fortune?" asked Mrs. Bradley, adding this trifle of information to the rest of what she was gaining.

"Charged for it, mind you. Trust a Froggie for that. I wouldn't let the girls have their palms read. Told them to keep their wages in their pockets and not be gotten ideas above their station in life, but Emily, as was head housemaid, she had hers told, though I don't think much of it turned out to be right because her's still in service and not as easy-goen as the Hall used to be, her says."

"You keep in touch, then?"

"On'y with her, though I used to get news of Mr. Parsons as was butler in my time. A very superior man was Mr. Parsons. He had begun life as a scout in an Oxford college and had picked up his speech from the young gentlemen there and, later on, he was with the Dean and learned his demeanour from him. Would you believe?—well, known him, I would!—he was once mistook be one of squire's guests for a Cabinet minister what he did somethen resemble. That'll tell you."

"Yes, indeed. Did Hortense read *his* palm?"

"She wanted to, but he was above it. He said he did not believe in superstitious rubbish, so she laughed in her nasty way and said he would find himself in court if he wasn't careful. Well, it was funny she should say that, because, of course, it wasn't all that long before he *did* find himself in court, but not in the dock, which I daresay was what she meant, but in the witness-box in front of crowner."

"Ah, yes. I have looked up old files of the county newspaper. He gave evidence of a quarrel which took place between the two young men on the evening before Mr. Ronald's death. I believe a girl's name was mentioned and Mr. Stone took umbrage."

"Well, she was Mr. Stone's sister. A boy ought to stand up for his sister's good name. That's what I say. But, of course, both of the young gentlemen was drunk at the time and I daresay they'd both forgot all about it, come the mornen."

"So Miss Stone was staying at the Hall with her brother. That means that Hortense was there in attendance upon her mistress."

"She was, too and all, the snoopen cat! Would you care for sommat to drink? It's out of hours, but it's all right if 'ee have it in here in the parlour."

"Thank you, but it is not the time of day for me. Do you have Mr. Parsons's present address? I believe I was told he is working in London."

"He do not write direct to me, but I used to get news of him from the caretaker up to the Hall, as used to be head groom there. Many a pint have Mr. Parsons and him sunk in company with each other in the old days, so 'em keeps in touch. Mr. Parsons, you see, could hobnob with outdoor staff if they was top of their tree (like the stables and the gardenen), but not with domestic staff, the housekeeper be-en above it and the rest—even me—beneath, pleasant though he always was to me."

"So he would hardly have hobnobbed with Maisie Touch."

"She was tweeny in my time, but this I can tell you, same as my husband told the court. If she was drunk when it happened, it wasn't through drink as she got in *this* house. He have his responsibilities, my husband have, and he'd no more serve that poor simpleton with more than she could carry than he would serve a baby, and that's gospel truth if ever anything was. Ask me, that poor dumb creature got a shove in the back off of that cattle-bridge. Goodness knows her'd crossed it plenty of times before. Even Maisie Touch wasn't simple enough to tumble off it of her own accord, and drunk she most certainly was not."

"Is there any chance that Maisie may have had some knowledge which was dangerous to somebody else?"

"If her did, her wouldn't know it."

"No, but, in all innocence, she may have mentioned something, don't you think?"

"But what have all this to do with young Jessie?"

"Time will show, and I feel Time has something up its sleeve."

"The only thing as Maisie Touch could have known was exactly what happened when Mr. Ronald got shot, but who'd bother about that, after all these years? I daresay, if she ever did see owt—and it would only have been by looken out of kitchen winder when she'd ought to have been busy at sink—she wouldn't have made much out of what she saw, I reckon, and nobody wouldn't have dared put her in witness-box for fear of the rubbish she might talk. Anyway, 'tis all over and done with, like I say."

"Does the caretaker at the Hall still come here?"

"No, not hardly at all nowadays. It's a long way for an old man to walk and then to walk back. Some of the gentlemen at the Hall flats haves their drinks delivered from Olquay, so he has his crate of stout sent in likewise, I reckon." She raised her voice. "Ted, when did us see Bob in here last?"

"Oh," said her husband, appearing in the doorway, "two months ago or more."

"When you saw him last, did he mention a Mrs. Martock? I have an impression that she would have rented one of the flats round about the time that Maisie Touch was drowned. She appears to be a lonely, introspective woman much given to sitting in what used to be the kitchen garden when the Hall was in private ownership or taking lonely walks alongside the river. Would she be a person whom Maisie Touch ever approached with a request for work, I wonder?"

"That could be. I don't wonder as that Mrs. Martock be sorrowful and lonely, like. 'Twas her own brother as shot Mr. Ronald. Her can't have happy memories of a time like that. Funny she should go back to the Hall after all these years."

"You mean that she was Miss Stone before she married?"

"I reckenised her the minute I see her in the post office one mornen. Of course she never reckernised me, not ever comen into my kitchen when I was cook up to the Hall and, even if her had, on'y ever see-en of me in my uniform with my cap on my yead and all that, but I couldn't be mistook about *her*. The girls and me, when dinner was over, used to sneak out and watch for the ladies in their ball-gowns and the gentlemen in their white ties and tails goen along to the ballroom. Mr. Parsons, he give us all their names, him, of course, be-en on dooty in the dinen-room and openen the front door to 'em when they arrived, and all that."

"What you tell me is most interesting. Well, I have effected what I came for, so I will leave Jessica's kindest regards with you—"

"And take mine back to her, if you please, madam, and tell her she's always welcome to the Cow and Lasher and to come out of hours so as me and her can have a good old chinwag. Little Jessica! Growed up and an educated young lady and a schoolteacher and all! Just fancy that!"

On the following morning Mrs. Bradley went by train to London and took a taxi to the address she had been given by the caretaker.

"Us don't write much," he had said, "but us keeps in touch, like, and he spends his fortnight here with me and we has a crack about old times."

The butler opened the door of the tall London house and Mrs. Bradley handed him her card. Before he could do more than glance at it, she told him that her business was with him and not with his employers. Sizing up the rather incredibly costumed visitor in the unerring manner of his kind, and mentally registering that she was a lady of quality, as the eighteenth century would have dubbed her, he trousered her five-pound note and enunciated faultlessly that his pantry was at her service.

Here Mrs. Bradley produced a copy of the newspaper photograph of Madame Setier and asked whether he

recognised the woman.

"Oh, yes, madam," he said, "I saw that newspaper photograph as soon as it came out. I knew her as Hortense, personal maid to Miss Stone at the time of the fatality to Mr. Ronald Havant when I was butler at Longwater Hall."

"Is it possible that she could have witnessed the accident?"

"Only a person who happened to be at the kitchen window at the time could have witnessed it, madam, and that would not apply to Hortense at that hour of the day."

"Oh, really? Why not?"

"To the best of my knowledge, the young person under advisement never went into the kitchen, having no possible reason to do so. She only appeared downstairs to visit the upper servants' table for her meals, and that table was in the servants' hall and did not overlook the kitchen garden."

"May I ask how long you were in service at the Hall?"

"A matter of nearly five years, madam, three years before Mr. Ronald's death, then the year Mrs. Havant died, and then the remaining months before Mr. Havant sold up."

"So you knew Mr. Ronald when he was at university, I suppose, but not as a child."

"That is correct, madam."

"I heard a somewhat improbable story about another violent death. It took place, I am told, in the grounds of the Hall when a summerhouse was burned to the ground by a child playing with matches."

"I, too, heard the story. There were references to it down at the Cow and Lasher after Mr. Ronald was killed. Of course nobody ever spoke of it up at the Hall. It was as much as anybody's place would have been worth, the master so upset about it. The way I heard the story was that Mr. Ronald himself, as a little lad, had been the incendiary and an old lady lost her life and her relatives brought a lawsuit."

“So Hortense spent much of her time attending to her mistress’s wardrobe in her own bedroom, I take it,” said Mrs. Bradley, reverting somewhat abruptly to the previous subject. “Did her room overlook the kitchen garden, by any chance?”

“Yes, I suppose it did, now you come to mention it, madam. If Hortense was in her room and heard the shooting going on, I wouldn’t wonder if she didn’t go to the window to find out what was happening. I never did think the shooting was all that accidental and if Hortense could prove it wasn’t—but, there! How could she? It would never occur to anybody, let alone a young person quite unaccustomed to firearms, to think of Master Ronald’s death as anything but accidental, whatever she thought she saw.”

“Nevertheless, she has been murdered.”

“But years after the accident took place, madam.”

“I have read the newspaper files and I believe there was a quarrel between the two young men. It took place, it seems, on the evening before the shooting.”

“As I had to admit at the inquest, but I can’t believe Mr. Stone shot Mr. Ronald in cold blood in that treacherous sort of way, whatever sort of provocation he may have thought he had.”

“The fact that he did shoot him does not appear to be in dispute. What do you really think happened?”

The butler looked thoughtful and then said, “May I ask, with respect, what your interest is in this long-forgotten episode, madam?”

“I am befriending a young woman named Jessica Denefield. Her father was called to give evidence in court, just as you were. She was unlucky enough to find Madame Setier’s body, as you probably know. You say you saw the photograph. I fear the police suspect her of having murdered the woman. The murder weapon may have come originally from the Hall. I believe it was pictured in the more

sensational newspapers, along with a photograph of Madame Setier."

"The greenstone griffin? There was a pair of them. I remember them well. They went at the auction to a dealer in antiques in Olquay. Mademoiselle—or Madame, as she seems to have called herself—must have seen them when she was at the Hall. I suppose she bought them off the dealer at some time or other. They were valuable, I believe, but the French are very thrifty, so no doubt she had money put by and could indulge her fancies."

"Yes. There is nothing to show how long she had owned the griffins, but they were certainly in the dealer's possession up to the day before his premises in Olquay caught fire, so she cannot have owned them for very many years if hers were the same pair. However, the point has no significance. If her murderer had not battered her with one of the griffins, no doubt some other weapon would have come to hand."

"Apart from her finding the body (which might have happened to anybody), what have the police got against Jessica Denefield, madam?"

"She has been misguided enough to rent what has come to be called the murder flat. It was in so little request that she is able to rent it very cheaply for herself and her mother. Economy was her watchword, but the police find it an insufficient guide to her actions and seem to think that she had some less admirable motive for moving into the place."

"Her father thought the same as Mr. Havant and I did. Mr. Ronald would never have walked across in front of an aimed gun," said the butler.

"So what do *you* think happened?"

"I'm left wondering if the young gentlemen fought a duel, madam. They were just about the age for that sort of dangerous nonsense."

"Fought a duel? But surely not with sporting guns? I thought pistols or swords were obligatory."

"You are pleased to make a joke of it, madam, but it was not at all pleasant for those of us who were mixed up in the matter."

"I did not intend a pleasantry, I assure you. But what made you think of a duel?"

"They were high-spirited young gentlemen, madam, who would have scorned to kill one another except in the most honourable way."

"I am interested to hear you say so. Had Mr. Stone visited the Hall before?"

"Oh, yes. I believe the two young gentlemen had known one another from childhood. Mr. Stone used to visit the Hall in my uncle's time."

"Your uncle?"

"I inherited the post of butler from him, madam, and he inherited it from his father before him. It was a family sinecure, you might say. Most, in other houses, had to work their way up—knife and boots, second footman, first footman—I believe my great-uncle did a spell as valet, too, before he received the accolade of becoming major-domo. I was lucky. I served my apprenticeship as a college scout at Oxford."

"What you tell me is most interesting. Would the name Martock mean anything to you?"

"Oh, yes, madam. Miss Stone married a Captain Martock about two years after Mr. Ronald's death. I read about it in *The Times* and there were photographs in the *Tatler*. Unfortunately, Captain Martock was killed in the hunting-field, leaving Mrs. Martock in rather reduced circumstances, I was told."

"She can afford to rent one of the flats at the Hall, though."

"So I believe, madam, but I understand she no longer has a lady's maid or anybody else to look after her. She

even does her own housework, I am told."

"Your information derives from your friend the caretaker, no doubt. Did it not surprise you that Mrs. Martock should choose to live in a house which must have had some unhappy memories for her? I believe she was in such a state of shock after Mr. Ronald Havant's death that she was unable to attend the inquest. Was there an understanding between her and Mr. Ronald?"

"Oh, I think not, madam. Her going back to the Hall again seems a somewhat morbid affair, but, as for the rest, it was *her* name which Mr. Ronald aspersed. It led to the fracas on the evening previous to the shooting and is my reason for thinking that, in spite of outward appearances at breakfast-time next morning and jokes about Mr. Stone's black eye, the young gentlemen had not re-established their wonted state of mutual cordiality."

"I am fascinated by what you tell me about your family connections and the hereditary nature of the kingship of the servants' hall at Longwater. You must be regretful that a tradition has come to an end. Is your uncle still among us?"

"Oh, yes, madam. I visit him on my evening off. He built up a nice little nest-egg for himself while he was butler before Mr. Havant pensioned him, so he's nicely placed and has a small flat in Ealing."

"I wonder whether he would help me with a paper I am preparing for the Philological Society on the diction and vocabulary of the upper middle classes and the lesser nobility at the turn of the present century? It would be commissioned work, of course."

"I'm sure he would be delighted, madam. I will write his address for you immediately."

14

Excursions

Mrs. Bradley had no expectation that her visits to Longwater Sedge would go undiscussed, even by those whom they concerned least. Moreover, she was engaged in a murder hunt and that, even by the most optimistic and conservative estimate, had to be listed as a dangerous occupation. More than once, during her earlier excursions into this field, her life had been threatened and in deference to the pleadings of her relatives she had installed guard dogs at the Stone House, fire extinguishers on both floors, had taken out a firearms licence, and kept a small weapon handy.

So far as Jessica Denefield's case was concerned, she had heard of four violent deaths, although only one of them was positively identified as murder. The first was almost certainly accidental, she thought. A small boy engaged in the forbidden pastime of playing with matches had panicked and an old lady had lost her life. Two young men had been at shooting practice and one of them had been killed. A feeble-minded girl had fallen into the river and been drowned. The circumstances were suspicious, but it seemed very doubtful whether foul play could be proved to have caused any of these deaths.

The fourth death, however, needed no proof that it was murder, although the identity of the killer was still a mystery. Dabblers in the muddy waters of petty crime live dangerously. Squabbles arise, the vested interests clash,

and physical violence, the last resort of untutored minds, is apt to be regarded as the solution of problems and the eventual deterrent to individual enterprise among lawbreakers.

So far as Madame Setier, the erstwhile lady's maid, was concerned, however, there were overtones which need have had nothing to do with her underworld associates. Her connection with Longwater Hall, however brief and however tenuous it had been, was firmly established. She had been there at the time of Ronald Havant's death and it was possible that from her bedroom window she had been a witness to the shooting. Indeed, it was more than possible; it was extremely likely, especially as she was aware, no doubt, that her young mistress was one of the party in the kitchen garden. It was a distinct probability that, if the killing had been deliberate, she might have used her knowledge to blackmail the killer. This meant that none of her criminal associates need have been involved in her murder at all.

But would her unsupported word have been sufficient to convince a jury, if the case had ever gone beyond the coroner's court, Mrs. Bradley wondered. The answer must lie in the fact that there had been another witness and that witness, it seemed, could have been Maisie Touch. Maisie as a lone witness would hardly have been believed, but if her evidence had been backed up not only by Madame Setier, but by Bill Scally, to whom at some time Maisie seemed to have confided it, the murderer (if murder had been committed in the kitchen garden that morning) might well have cause for fear.

Against this, there had to be set the fact that Maisie had been allowed to live so long. It was not until years after Ronald Havant's death that Maisie had fallen off the cattle-bridge and been drowned. Again, as in the case of young Havant, unless a witness, preferably an eye-witness, came forward, there was no proof that the death was anything but

accidental. Village opinion seemed to be that Maisie had been pushed into the river purposely, but, as Mrs. Bradley knew well, the human preference is always for the sensational rather than for the pedestrian explanation of untoward happenings, and allowance had to be made for this sometimes unlovely foible.

She returned to the Stone House to sort out her priorities and, having made up her mind what to do first, she wrote a comforting note to Jessica, dropped it in at the Barge School, and then called at the local police station. Here she found Salcombe courteous but obdurate.

"She found the body," he insisted, "and her fingerprints are all over the front legs and the hindquarters of the murder weapon. She must have picked it up in both hands."

"I suppose it is heavy, so that both hands were needed."

"Whoever used it would have needed both hands to bring that square base down on the victim's head, too, ma'am."

"That the murderer was a woman seems to me an unwarrantable assumption. I see this as a man's crime."

"As I've said to Detective-Sergeant Bedford, Miss Denefield is a tall, powerful young lady and pretty hardboiled at that. Having found a murdered body—and, although the head was very nicely cleaned and patched for our newspaper photograph when we needed identification, it wasn't a pretty sight when she first saw it, I can tell you—she has the nerve to rent the flat. A girl who could do that has nerve enough to commit murder."

"Like all girls in any kind of trouble, she wanted to have her mother with her. The rent of that flat was within her compass so that the two of them could live together."

"I don't think that explanation is good enough, ma'am. My belief, she's hiding something from us there, although what it can be goodness knows. We've been over the premises more than once with a small-tooth comb."

"Then why not give her the benefit of the doubt and conclude that there is nothing for you to find? Is it fair to continue to harass the girl?"

"I have my job to do. Besides, we've established a connection between Miss Denefield and a big house just outside the village of Longwater Sedge. This house, Longwater Hall, is within a stone's throw of the cottage where Miss Denefield used to live."

"And which she left when she was nine years old. I have established another connection. There is living at the Hall, which, as no doubt you have found out, has been turned into flats, a woman who was resident at the Hall when the heir to the property was killed in what purported to be a shooting accident."

"I don't follow you, ma'am. What has that to do with the case I am investigating?"

"I have discovered that your dead woman, Madame Setier, could have witnessed the shooting and that it need not have been an accident, but wilful murder, a fact to which she could have testified."

"And so?"

"Instead of testifying to murder, she pursued another course. My view is that Madame Setier was murdered by somebody she had been blackmailing for years."

Salcombe pulled the lobe of his right ear and then scratched his jaw.

"Of course I know about one or two cases in which you've been successful," he said, "but, if you're right about the blackmail business, why did the victim suddenly decide to take action? Why not have gone on paying? Do you think the blackmailer got too greedy? There's no proof of blackmail, you know. Even our examination of Madame Setier's account proves nothing because, although we can check out her profits on the corsetry business, we can't check whether all the other money—and she was worth a bit—came from her undercover dealings with thieves or (as is

possible—I grant you that) from blackmail. Who is this person you mention as having taken a flat at Longwater Hall?”

“A Mrs. Martock, née Stone, and a Mr. Stone, her brother, admitted at the inquest on Mr. Ronald Havant that his was the ‘curst hand that fired the shot.’ Do you know your *Helen of Kirconnell*, Detective-Superintendent? Mr. Stone admitted the killing and was apparently overcome with emotion at the inquest. In my submission, he was guiltless of his friend’s murder and the emotion he showed was a genuine expression of grief and horror.”

“I’m afraid I don’t get your drift, ma’am.”

“Helen of Kirconnell sacrificed herself to save her lover’s life. The penalty for murder is hanging, of course. Less drastic retribution may be exacted in due course, and life sentences in place of the death sentence be introduced, but that time is not yet.”

“You think Mr. Stone acted as standin for his sister? And got away with it? I don’t see what bearing that has on the present case, even if you are right.”

“Maybe it has none. I have no desire to be didactic. However, you really have no case against Miss Denefield, you know.”

“Well, nothing that would stand up in court, I admit, ma’am, but we shall pursue our enquiries. I shall certainly go down to Longwater Hall and interview this Mrs. Martock.”

“For what it’s worth, Madame Setier, who then was called Hortense, was Mrs. Martock’s personal maid.”

“And was not, at that time, a member of the criminal classes, I suppose, ma’am.”

“Presumably not. Again I throw out the information for what it may be worth. I think there is some ground for supposing that Hortense saw the killing of Mr. Ronald Havant and, if she did, for asking whether there is not reason to suspect that some of her income was derived from blackmailing Mr. Stone.”

"But if the death of Havant *was* accidental, the Stones had nothing to fear from a blackmailer, ma'am, and, according to the verdict at the inquest, it seems that any suspicion of foul play must be ruled out."

"There are such things as wheels within wheels, Detective-Superintendent."

"You speak in riddles, ma'am."

"Maybe it is the fault of my profession. The Delphic Oracle, if you remember, suffered the same disability. However, I will tell you everything that I have found out and the surmises which I have based upon my knowledge. One thing remains for us to discover. When we know that, we shall be well on the way to concluding this investigation."

She gave Salcombe a succinct and accurate account of her researches and then asked whether they did not shed some light on what she described as "this somewhat tedious but ultimately rewarding spanning of the years."

Salcombe shook his head, but in perplexity, not in negation.

"You really believe this business is the result of the accidental death of an old lady when Ronald Havant was a naughty little boy, ma'am? But, even supposing you could prove that Mr. Stone was the little boy confined to the house and his sister was in the house with him, and that the old lady was their grandmother, are children so fond of their grandmothers that they would nurse a grudge against another child for all those years and then, in the end, kill him?"

"I think there is more to the issue than that. I think there must be. Mr. Havant, Ronald's father, if he is still alive, will be able to settle the question of whether the old lady *was* the Stones' grandmother. If she was not, then the house I have built is a house of cards. However, if the relationship can be proved—and I am sure it can, since the old lady's name was Stone and she is buried at Longwater

Sedge—I think a visit to Somerset House and a perusal of her will is indicated.”

“And you really think this daft village girl being tipped into the Longwater is all part and parcel of the goings-on, ma’am?”

“It fits my theories, as I have explained, and I do not think I am theorising ahead of my data.”

“Well, it’s fantastic and it’s interesting.”

“And you don’t really believe a word of it,” said Mrs. Bradley, leering at him.

“I wouldn’t altogether say that, ma’am. You’ve been very fair with me, so I’ll keep you in the picture. Goodness knows, I don’t want to keep leaning on Miss Denefield if I don’t have to.”

Jessica replied gratefully to Mrs. Bradley’s letter. “The police,” she wrote, “seem to be letting up on me, and the noises mother and I used to hear in the flat have ceased. I think somebody must have been looking for something. If so, either they found it or else they have concluded it isn’t there. I don’t know whether they thought there was a hoard tucked away in the attic, but, at any rate, the nuisance has now ceased and mother and I are very glad of that. The term is coming to an end and we have been invited to spend the holiday with my uncle and aunt, but shall only stay a week, as my mother’s old lady needs looking after and a week is as long as her own daughter can be away from her home. I have had to leave my holiday address with the police, but they were very nice about it, which makes a change after their previous attitude. I am beginning to think that perhaps they don’t believe I did it after all. I’ve still got the second greenstone griffin. I don’t know why I’ve kept it, but I’ve had some superstitious feeling that the second griffin might find some way of telling me who had committed the murder. I have always been very silly about the griffins, I’m afraid, but childhood fantasies die hard.”

Despite her former doubts, Mrs. Bradley's next move was, after all, to speak with Bill Scally, preferably when he was sober. George drove her to the cottage in which her quarry lived with a lurcher bitch, three ferrets (a male and two females), two trout rods (in case one was impounded), an unlicensed gun, a number of rabbit snares, and a set of old-fashioned climbing-irons with which (it had been his boast before fourteen days without the option had taught him to keep a still tongue in his head even when he was in his cups) he could scale a tree and take a nesting pheasant or her eggs without disturbing the other birds. This claim, incidentally, had never been verified since, not unnaturally, there had never been any witnesses to the exploit.

Mrs. Bradley had chosen to visit Bill before the Cow and Lasher opened in the morning. She hoped that, by the time she arrived, he would have slept off his potions of the night before. He was bleary-eyed and unkempt when he answered George's knock on the cottage door, but apparently in his right mind and even welcoming.

"Whatcher, mate," he said. "Brought that fiver with 'ee?"

"Ah," said George, "and the lady who will give it to you. You'll have to answer a question or two to get it, same as I said before."

"Oo is she?"

"Nobody you know. Does research. Village life and that sort of thing. Village idiots. She wants your views about Maisie Touch."

"Poor Maisie Touch wasn't no idiot. Simple, mind you, and I reckon most of us lads had our bit of fun with her, but who pushed her into the Longwater and drowned her, well, it wasn't nobody in this village. I be right sure of that."

"Will you have a word with my lady?"

"Ah. If her'll come acrorst with five pounds, I'll have half a dozen if her wants 'em."

George returned to the car.

"Well, what are the omens?" asked his employer.

"Favourable, madam. The man is sober and is fully prepared to offer information in return for a promise of largesse."

"How do you assess him?"

"Well, madam, I fear he has one thing in common with the great Dr. Johnson; he stinks. I would advocate holding your conference in the open air. Nevertheless, he knows a hawk from a handsaw, as Shakespeare puts it."

Sally himself appeared to have anticipated George's advice to Mrs. Bradley, for, as she got out of the car, he came out of the cottage and met her at the gate.

"You want to see me, ma'am?"

"Yes, Mr. Sally. You remember a girl called Maisie Touch?"

"Poor thing as got herself drowned? I wish I could get my hands on the murderin skunk as done it."

"You think it was murder, then?"

"Maisie wouldn't have walked herself off of no bridge over no river. Daffy she may have bin, but her had plenty of horse-sense."

"Why should anybody want her out of the way?"

"Whoever done it had got her in the family way, I reckon, and wasn't goen to face up to haven to make an honest woman of her."

"Nothing of that kind came out at the inquest, did it? I have another theory, which I should like to check with you. I wonder whether Maisie knew something which somebody else did not want disclosed? It must have been something important, I think."

"Oh, her talked a fair load of old rubbish at times, what anybody could make of it, which weren't much."

"What did she know about the death of Mr. Ronald Havant?"

"Oh, that! She once told me some gibberish, but I didn't take no heed to it."

"Did you ever repeat it to another person?"

"Not me. Well, I might have made mention of it down at the Cow, like, but on'y in the way of a bit of a joke, and nobody didn't think no more about it."

"You wouldn't care to tell me what it was?"

"'Twadn't nothen. All her said was as there was on'y one gun when the young gents started their shooten, but there was two guns when Mr. Ronnie was killed, and her reckoned her 'ud give me two guesses where it come from and oo went and fetched it from the house."

"That hardly sounds like something which she made up. Did she say any more than that?"

"I reckon not. Her pulled her face this way an' that, like she allus done when she was excited, but I reckon there was two guns there all the time, be-en as there was two gennelmen doen the shooten. Two guns and two gents and two guesses. Her was stuck on twos, that's why I reckon she was carryen, but oo put her that way—"

"That was a strange remark she made, all the same. I suppose she had been watching the shooting for some little time."

"Said her was at sink and looken out of kitchen winder when she heard the shots be-en fired, but I don't reckon her 'ud of seen very much. She'd have bin called to order pretty quick if her stopped worken to start gawpen."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, thank you, Mr. Scally." He pulled his matted front hair, tucked away the five-pound note, and returned to his unsavoury domicile. Mrs. Bradley got back into the car, remarking, as she settled herself before George closed the car door, "Well worth five pounds, I think, George, don't you?"

"I was doubtful, madam, but if you are satisfied—oh, excuse me, madam. I believe Scally is desirous of further conversation." Instead of getting into the driver's seat, he went to the cottage gate.

"What is it?" he asked. "Madam is in a hurry and you won't get any more than she's given you already."

"As well I knows, but I gives value for money, I does, and I remembers summat else about poor old Maisie. Just afore her got drowned, her bin seed hangen around the Hall. Told 'em she was looken for work, but there was on'y one lady as wasn't suited and *she* told old Bob to tell Maisie to sling her hook, as she didn't need nobody to do for her."

"All right. I'll pass on the message. Anything else?"

"On'y as it were a week or so arter that as Maisie got drowned. Couldn't be nothen in it, I don't suppose, but it stick in my mind."

"The inference is clear," said Mrs. Bradley, when George had relayed the information, "but I wonder how Maisie knew that Mrs. Martock had taken one of the flats at the Hall?"

"These simple persons are very cunning, madam. She may have seen Mrs. Martock in the post office or somewhere. The post mistress would have known where Mrs. Martock was living and would have seen no reason to withhold the information if Maisie asked for it. Village post offices are hotbeds of gossip, madam."

"Well, it certainly was in the Longwater Sedge post office that the wife of the landlord at the Cow and Lasher recognised Mrs. Martock, and, if Scally's story is true, a logical sequence follows. Mrs. Martock came to Longwater Sedge with a specific purpose. I think another visit to the Hall flats is required."

The caretaker was pleased to see her.

"You don't give up easy, ma'am, do 'ee?" he said. "Well, I ent got nothen to offer 'ee yet awhile, but you keep on perseveren and you never know."

"I wondered, from something I heard in the village, whether perhaps Mrs. Martock was thinking of vacating her flat."

"First I've year'd of it. I reckon that come from Nessie Tedbury at the post office. If there ent nothen for them oomans to gossip about, I reckon her invent it. Well, Mrs. Martock be out walken at present and the Dear knows how long her'll be, but p'raps 'ee'd like to come in and wait."

"If she is walking beside the river, I shall soon find her. If I do not, I can always write to you or come again."

"'Tis like when I used to mount the visitors for riden or hunten in the old days. I mind me of one young gentleman in partic'lar. No hands, no seat, no savvy of any sort at all, and if he fell off once he fell off a dozen times and allus come back smothered in mud and bruises. But, my oath, he was a trier! I does like to see a trier!"

"Well, I hope I shan't end by being covered in mud and bruises, but I appreciate the implied compliment."

It was bitterly cold down by the river, so much so that Mrs. Martock must have decided to cut short her walk, for Mrs. Bradley saw her standing on the stone bridge to whose coping the infant Jessica had so often been lifted by her aunt when they were on a visit to the mill. She took the wintry, extremely muddy path with the water-meadows between her and the river and went to meet her quarry. A strange little dialogue ensued.

"You've chosen a muddy path."

"You also. I had not realised that it would be so bleak down here, even at this time of year." They walked back towards the mill, sometimes side by side, but where the path narrowed or where there were large puddles, in single file. "As a matter of fact, I left my car in the drive and came to find you. Is it true that you are thinking of vacating your flat?"

"Good heavens, no! Well, at any rate, not yet. This is no time of year to think of moving, is it?"

"Indeed not, yet it is melancholy in the country in winter, especially down here by the water. I always think the

sound of the wind in the reeds has something deathlike about it.”

“That sounds fanciful to me, but I never had any imagination.”

“You did not imagine, for instance, that there was a second gun taken to the kitchen garden on the morning of Mr. Ronald Havant’s death?”

“What an earth are you talking about? A second gun?” There was no doubt the woman was startled.

“A second gun. That is to say, the woman who fell off the cattle-bridge down there”—Mrs. Bradley waved a yellow claw in the direction of the mill as she skipped adroitly over one of the smaller puddles—“seems to have mentioned something of the sort down at the village public house.”

“Oh, that!”

“Yes, that. You have been recognised in the village as the former Miss Stone. I suppose that a devoted and goodnatured sister would feel bound to help her brother if he was dissatisfied with his plaything. You went back to the house and brought out another gun.”

“I? Good gracious! It was never the custom for women to wait upon men. On what notions *can* you have been brought up?”

“Perhaps on the modern and misguided fiction that the sexes are equal. I may add, perhaps, that they are certainly equal in the eyes of the law, especially where the issue is a matter of life and death.”

15

Alarms

They walked on in a long, constrained silence until they reached the bridge which carried the road to the Hall. Here Mrs. Martock said stiffly, "I think I will walk into the village. I need postage stamps."

"Let me give you a lift. It is not far to the Hall flats and I have my car there."

"I prefer to walk, thank you. When you mentioned that dreadful business—you know, Ronnie's death—you didn't mean that the police are interested in it all over again, did you? I mean, it's years and years since it happened."

"It was never explained very satisfactorily, I believe, and now it seems that there could have been two witnesses to the shooting and both have met violent deaths. The verdict on Ronald Havant was not entirely uncontested, you know. Two of the household servants testified that, in their opinion and from their knowledge of him, the young man would never have walked across a line of fire, and I have been told by the daughter of one of them who had the information from her father—he was one of the witnesses in question—that Mr. Havant senior was in strong dissent with the coroner's verdict."

"But that proves nothing."

"Quite; but it may have been enough to cause the police to keep the case upon their files. Now, of course, we have this business of two people who may have been eye-

witnesses to what happened. Both have been killed. One was drowned—”

“Oh, if you mean a woman called Maisie Touch—I heard about that soon after I came down here—she was hardly better than a lunatic, I believe, and was said to have been drunk at the time.”

“She was simple, not mentally deranged, and I am assured that she could not have been drunk. Current opinion is that she was pushed into the river.”

“It sounds nonsense to me.”

“Then there is incontrovertible evidence that another woman who may have been in a position to have seen how Ronald Havant died has been bludgeoned to death. You will be aware, no doubt, that this was your former maid Hortense. I am sure that you followed her fortunes for some time after she left you.”

“Certainly not! I dismissed her for impudence and washed my hands of her completely.”

“I see. She seems to have joined the criminal classes under cover of a respectable business in corsetry where she was known as Madame Setier.”

“Indeed? I couldn’t be less interested.”

“Then I am sorry to have wearied you.”

“Not at all. Goodbye, Mrs. Bradley.” She strode off towards the village. Mrs. Bradley walked sedately back to the Hall and her car.

“Well, George, I have set the cat among the pigeons,” she said, as he held open the door of the car, “so now it remains to be seen what happens next. A little more than a mere fluttering in the dovecotes, I surmise.”

“With all respect, madam, I think I ought to be sleeping in the house for a bit.”

“I thought you valued your privacy and independence in your bachelor cottage.”

“I do indeed, madam, but I value your personal safety a great deal more, if I may say so.” He made an awkward but

touching little bow, closed the door of the car, and took his place at the wheel, a stolid, respectable, reliable man with the heart, thought Mrs. Bradley not for the first time, of a knight errant. She looked at his solid shoulders and reflected that, whether she gave permission or not, he would conspire with her other servants to get himself a bed in the Stone House until he knew that she had no enemies to fear.

It was Jessica who had the first experience of the stirring-up of trouble. Her children at the Barge School, she discovered, had no knowledge whatever of the history of the old town at which the narrow-boats tied up at the end of their long journey from the Midlands, so she decided that, on a day when the weather was agreeable, she would take them on a tour based on the local history.

She was thorough-going and conscientious, so, as soon as she and her mother had done the weekend shopping, she spent the whole of a Saturday morning in the reference department at the local library while her mother, who still refused to stay alone in the flat, looked at magazines and newspapers in the reading room or pottered about the town gazing in shop windows.

In the afternoon, following out the route which Jessica had planned from her notes, the two of them explored the area. It was an interesting old place and they were lucky enough to see it before, in later years, the demolition squads and the bulldozers got busy and reconstructed the high street, broadened and opened up the grimy but picturesque alleys which led to the river, demolished the insanitary cottages, and turned Miss Ware's school into a clinic.

"On Monday," said Jessica, "I'll make a coloured time chart with the kids and we'll do everything in chronological order when we do the tour, but that means retracing our steps a good bit and entails a lot of extra walking which

won't be necessary for you and me this afternoon. Besides, it gets dark early this time of year. The kids and I will set out as soon as I've marked the register and had prayers, and that will give us the whole morning some time next week, but you and I have only got about a couple of hours this afternoon. I don't much fancy Ferry Lane and the other alleyways after dark."

So they began at the canal bridge near the Barge School. There had once been a chapel-of-ease on the bridge before the canal was made. It had been a tiny, thirteenth-century building near the site now occupied by a toffee factory. No trace remained of the chapel, but Jessica thought the children should be shown where it had stood, as there was another chapel-of-ease towards the other end of the high street which had been enlarged to form a church dedicated to St. George, and very near it was a small hall, once the earliest school building in the town. She thought the children would like to see it.

Along the high street they came to St. Lawrence's church, some Tudor cottages, an inn which had been featured in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and an even older inn where Edward IV had once held a Chapter of the Garter.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses followed, and up a lane which branched off from the ancient marketplace and the law courts there was a very wide road still called The Butts, once a field where archery had been practised in mediaeval days. At one corner of a large open space where elections were once held, there stood a fine Georgian house in which the cottage hospital, in Jessica's time, was housed, although the house came into private ownership again later, when a new hospital was built elsewhere.

Further on, an almost semicircular bulge in the road indicated the site of an Ancient British camp and further on still there was a Tudor mansion, once the property of Elizabeth I's Thomas Gresham. Local history described how,

from an upper room, Charles I had watched a minor battle of the Civil War being fought in the fields which then flanked the high street.

"You'll have plenty to tell they children," said Mrs. Denefield admiringly, as they rejoined the high street and began the last leg of the tour.

"Yes, the town has everything. I hope all the walking won't be too much for the barge children. I don't suppose they're accustomed to too much foot-slogging on pavements."

They passed the grocer's and the fruiterer's above which their flat was situated and the outfitter's and jeweller's from which Jessica had seen the griffins. Further on they turned down Ferry Lane.

"This is rather important," said Jessica. "The river at the bottom of this alley used to be fordable and the Romans landed here, took the village (as it was then), and made camp northwards beyond that mansion we saw on the Manor Road."

"I don't know how 'ee keeps it all in your mind."

"I don't. I depend on notes. We'll just take a look at the river because there's a memorial, a sort of obelisk thing, put up a few years back to mark the place where the Romans landed. There's an inscription which the children can copy down."

"Come further away from the water," said her mother a little later. "There's a man ben followen us all the way from the fire station. I didn't think he was followen us at first, but, now he's turned down here, I reckon he must be."

Jessica turned round and saw a man of medium height wearing an ulster and a tweed hat. This hat he raised politely as he came up to them.

"A pleasant afternoon for the time of year," he said.

"Yes, indeed," said Jessica, taking her mother's arm and turning to walk away.

"I'm a local reporter. Didn't I see you at an inquest recently?"

"Not very recently."

"I wonder whether you would come to our office and give me an interview?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I don't think my education committee would want me to do that."

"Oh, surely!"

"Thank you, no."

"Well, will you sell me that eagle-headed ornament you have in the window of your flat? I can get a story out of that, I expect."

"It doesn't belong to me, so I couldn't sell it. Now, if you'll excuse us—hey! Aren't you the man who tried to buy it the other day?"

At that moment the ferryboat pulled in and a man and two women got off. Jessica, still holding her mother's arm, fell in behind them as they walked up the alley towards the high street. The man who had accosted them made no attempt to follow. When Jessica glanced over her shoulder he had turned his back and was looking at the river.

"Wasn't 'ee a bit short with him, like?" asked her mother.

"No, I don't think so. He had certainly been following us, and I didn't like it."

"What have 'ee got to lose, haven story in the papers?"

"My job, most likely. Anyway, I've no proof that he is a reporter. He didn't much look like those I saw at the inquest. Besides, I recognised his voice as well as his face, although he looked different in that hat."

"He did. I knows him now, though."

"Something very strange has just occurred to me. I'm pretty sure his was the voice from over the fence which told me, when I went to the flat the first time, that visitors usually walked straight in. He must have disguised his voice when he wanted to buy the griffin."

"Glory be! Then he could be the murderer!"

"I think that's a bit far-fetched, but he certainly knew something about the flat. Why should he want to buy the griffin? It could have been just an excuse to get into the flat."

"Oh, Lordy! I don't care for the sound of that!"

"Neither do I, mum. What's more, there was something else about him I seemed to recognise. I *know* I've seen him somewhere else, not in this town at all."

"Well, seemenly he was at inquest."

"It goes a lot further back than that. Do you remember my going to a party at the Hall when we lived in Longwater Sedge?"

"Ah, I mind that. They wouldn't let 'ee wear your pinny with the ribbons freddled through the insertion."

"That's right. Well, I can't be sure, but I wonder whether he could have been one of the young men who came in with Mr. Ronald and romped about with us kids."

"'Ee be dreamen!"

"Perhaps. There's one more thing. He could have been the ghost of the flat."

"I thought as how you was pretty sure that was him from the shop down below."

"Yes, well, that would be more likely, I suppose. Anyway, if he speaks to one of us again, I shall threaten him with the police. Even if he is a reporter he has no right to harass us."

"You couldn't hardly call it that. He minded his manners."

On Monday morning they left the flat together, but a quarter of an hour earlier than usual. Jessica wanted to prepare her time chart and to set out a collection of cardboard figures which she had drawn, cut out, and painted as part of her college course. She thought that the barge children might enjoy making small copies of them to be stuck on to the time chart.

The morning passed pleasantly, although only five children turned up, a boy and two girls from one narrow-boat, a boy and a girl from another. At twelve o'clock she sent them off to have their midday break, stood at the door, and watched the school caretaker go off for his own meal, and then she returned to the schoolroom and took out her sandwiches and flask of tea.

She had hardly begun her lunch when there was a tap on the door. Jessica thought it was an educational publisher's traveller and she did not want to see one, particularly in her dinner hour. Before she had time to bolt what she was eating and get to the door, it was opened. Her Ferry Lane acquaintance closed the door behind him, walked towards her, and wished her a good afternoon.

"You have no business here," she said. "You are trespassing."

"Oh, come now, don't be like that. I only want something for my paper."

"This is my lunchtime. Please go away."

"You could come and have lunch with me at the Beehive, if that would suit you. We could talk there in comfort."

"And have somebody see me go into a public house?"

"That's not a crime, is it?"

"I've never asked. Do please leave me alone. I have nothing which would interest you." She kept her voice steady, but she was scared. His quietness was menacing, his next suggestion even more so. What might have appeared nothing more than an attempt to "make a pass" at a comely girl, now, in her present state of mind, appeared to Jessica to be a signal of danger, not to her virginity but to her life.

"Look," the man said, "no need for us to be bad friends. What's the matter with you, anyway? Why don't we take a stroll along the canal and have a friendly talk? It's not cold out and you've got a coat. Come on, now. I won't plague you

about selling me the candlestick thing. I swear I won't. A nice girl like you shouldn't be standoffish. While we're out, you could tell me why you took on that flat."

"Because it is rented to me very cheaply, and you can guess why that is. Look, my time is limited. The children will be back soon. Do you want me to call the caretaker and have him chase you out?"

"He isn't in the building. I made sure of that." He came towards her. Jessica put the length of the teacher's table between them and picked up the blackboard pointer. Why she should find him alarming she could not have said, but, apart from that, his persistence now made her angry as well as frightened.

"If you don't leave at once," she said, still in control of her voice, "I'll jab this in your eye."

"My, my! Is that how you tackle the schoolchildren? All right, I'll go, if that's how you feel."

"You're that man who called to me over the fence!"

He waved what she took to be a rueful hand and went, leaving the door wide open. Jessica, still grasping the pointer, waited for a minute or two, went after him, and watched him cross the canal bridge before she closed the door and went back to a meal which she no longer wanted.

She was annoyed with herself to find that her heart was beating heavily and that the hand which held the pointer was shaking. She laid down the long stick, seated herself, and forced down the rest of her sandwiches. She was greatly relieved when the children came back for afternoon school.

"P'rap you was mistook and he is a reporter arter all," said her mother that evening, "but he have no right to argle-bargle with 'ee in school."

"Well, I suppose it wasn't exactly in school time, but he was trespassing, all the same, as I told him. If I see any more of him at all, I shall certainly go to the police. I won't put up with being pestered. You know, mum, I don't want to

panic, but I do wish the shops downstairs weren't empty all night. Whatever his reason, this man is keeping the tabs on me."

"I reckon the police keeps an eye on shops, see-en there's stock there for the taken. Us'll lock up good and proper as usual, and there's liver and bacon for supper. Don't 'ee start fretten. He haven't used language, nor threatened 'ee, nor nothen, have he, now?"

"No," said Jessica. She was tempted to add (but did not do so, for her mother's sake), "And neither have the police caught the murderer yet, and this man, I'm positive, knew that when I walked into the flat, that first time, I'd find the body. He provided a suspect for the police. He must be the murderer, but why is he pestering me?"

That evening Jessica and her mother moved Jessica's single bed into Mrs. Denefield's room and Jessica took the remaining griffin from the room which they had never used and placed the heavy ornament against the inside of the bedroom door and rested a tin tray against it.

"If anybody pushes against that," she said, "one of us is bound to hear him. I'm glad we had a man in to nail up that door to the attic. The only means of getting into the flat is through the outside door, and that's bolted as well as locked at night."

"It's on'y locked from the outside and not bolted at all when us both goes out, though," said Mrs. Denefield. "Think there's any chance somebody could get in by daylight and hide hissen away like Bond done?"

"We'd know the lock had been forced. I had it changed. We'd go straight to the police without going in. Don't worry, mum." (All very well, she thought to herself. I'm scared.)

"I note," said Mrs. Bradley, "that you and Henri have decided to take in a lodger."

Celestine, who, with her husband the chef, had been at the Stone House for years, looked suspiciously at her employer.

"Madame amuses herself," she said coldly.

"George, I mean."

"Ah, that one! Henri like to have another man in the house. Madame makes an objection?"

"I trust you are making George comfortable."

Celestine relaxed her attitude.

"That accomplishes itself," she said. So, with Jessica's flat and the Stone House both fortified against intruders, Mrs. Bradley visited Jessica again and heard her story, but Jessica saw no more of the so-called reporter and the Stone House remained inviolate. Holidays came. Jessica contrived little festivities at the Barge School and then she and her mother gladly accepted an invitation from the uncle and aunt to spend the Christmas week with them.

They returned to find the flat intact, although they were extremely nervous at the thought of re-entering it. However, all was well. They lighted fires and unpacked the provisions which the aunt had provided for them to bring back. Then they settled down behind the locked and bolted outside door.

This was on a Sunday evening after a tiresome cross-country journey on which they had been obliged to change trains twice, so they retired early. At just after ten there was a tremendous knocking. Jessica was not asleep. She slid out of bed and put on her dressing-gown and a pair of stout shoes.

"Who's there?" she called out when she had put aside the doorstep formed by the griffin and had gone to the outside door.

"Police. Open up."

"How many of you?"

"Police. Open up."

"Whom do you want? There are five of us here."

There was no reply. Then she thought she heard somebody stumble on the outside stair and when she darted to the bedroom window she was in time to see a man and a woman leave the opening to the alley. She could see nothing much of them, even as they emerged into the gaslit high street, except that they were certainly not in police uniform, neither had the voice been that of either Salcombe or his sergeant. She went back to bed seriously disturbed.

"Who was it?" her mother asked. "What did they want?"

"It was only a drunk who had come down the wrong alleyway, I think," said Jessica lightly.

"I thought I heard him say he was police."

"Yes, he did, but he wasn't."

"I wish as us could move away from yere. On'y a drunk, you says? He's a right branten fellow, any road, whoever he be. The thought of knocken us up at night do give me the crims."

"Yes, I'm not too happy, either. When you go to your old lady tomorrow, I shall go out for the day. I'll pop up to London and put in some time at the British Museum or Westminster Abbey and the Tate Gallery or somewhere. I'll get some lunch at a Lyons. It's the last day of the school holiday, so I shan't waste it."

"You'll be back time as I gets whome, won't 'ee?"

"Yes, of course. I'll meet you under the alley archway as usual. If I'm early I expect Bond will let me wait in the shop down below. I'll be back before you get home, anyway."

"So I do hope, though I be real chawley-wist to be such a ninny, but I be right dathered by all this business as us be mixed up with."

Tram-car and bus took Jessica to a London underground station. Here she took a ticket to Charing Cross, got out on the Embankment side of the station, and spent some time looking at the river. Then she walked to Westminster Bridge

and spent the time before lunch in Westminster Abbey. She lunched in Lyons, and it was when she was looking in the Lyons' shop window after lunch and was deciding upon the cakes she would buy to take back to her mother for their tea that she saw the man. He was reflected in the glass.

"He must have followed me," thought Jessica, in a panic. She went into the shop, made her purchases, and put them in the bag she had brought with her. When she emerged from the shop, the man had gone, swallowed up in the crowd. She tried to convince herself that she had mistaken somebody else for him, but this failed. She knew she had not been mistaken. Then she tried to pretend that it was by the merest accident that he and she should have been in London and outside the same shop at the same time, but this did not work either.

"What's his game?" she thought desperately. "If only I hadn't told him I had recognised him as the voice over the fence! Is that what he wanted to find out—whether I knew who he was?"

All pleasure in her day out was gone. She went to the post office, obtained a letter-card, and wrote to Mrs. Bradley. She posted it and then, greatly daring, for she had never done such a thing before, she summoned a passing taxi. She glanced fearfully out of the window, but the crowds effectively hid the man if he was there. She wondered whether he would have seen her get into the taxi and was following her in another one, but when she got out at Piccadilly Circus no other taxi drew up behind hers. She took her ticket and a train came in. She gave a last glance around but saw nothing of the man.

"But he *was* there," she told her mother, "and I'm beginning to be sick-frightened. I hate to keep bothering her, but I've written to Mrs. Bradley again. We can do with a friend."

16

The Past Rears Its Head

While Jessica's letter was still in the post, Mrs. Bradley took the London train again to Waterloo and went by taxi from there to the address in Ealing which the butler had given her.

"He will be delighted to be of any help he can, madam," the nephew had told her, so she had written to the old man and had received a courteous reply, in copybook handwriting, almost by return of post.

The flat was the top floor of a private house in a respectable little street not far from the Uxbridge road. The landlady, a shrewd-eyed, middle-aged, middle-spread Jewess, opened the door. She had been told, as was immediately obvious, to expect the visitor.

"Mrs. Bradley?" she said, looking at the visitor's card. "Up the stairs, please. He is expecting you. Frail and old, so please not too long talking. His age is of ninety-one years."

The host was already at the head of the stairs.

"My visitor, Mrs. Lipmann?" he called down.

"And not to descend the stairs! I send her up to you. Too good a tenant for me to risk giving him a heart attack by downstairing, upstairing, if not needed," she explained to Mrs. Bradley.

"You are very kind to him."

"He is my living, except my daughter Rachel, who is confidential secretary to a big man in Combines, and a very

good girl to her mamma.”

Mrs. Bradley mounted the stairs and was taken to a fair-sized sitting-room which overlooked the quiet little street. The old man saw her seated and then retired for a moment to return with wine glasses and a decanter.

“I hope you will join me, madam,” he said. “I have always thought that the former barmaid at the Criterion was a very sensible woman.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. Bradley. “You refer, no doubt, to Uncle George’s Mrs. Wilberforce of the magenta hair, the legitimate knee, and the controversial spine.”

“How well you know the works of the Master of English Prose, madam! Yes, indeed! Her dictum, as I am sure you will remember, was that port is wholesome, that she preferred a drop of port herself, and that she considered cocktails a danger to health.”

He poured. They silently toasted the M. of E.P., as Wodehouse himself had not, but ought to have, described himself, and then Mrs. Bradley took out her notebook. How she steered the conversation from the English language as it was used and misused by lords, ladies, and gentlemen at the turn of the century to the dreadful death of an elderly woman at Longwater Hall because a child had panicked, the old man never knew, because she made the transition appear so natural and inevitable.

Once launched upon the subject, however, he resembled Tennyson’s brook and it was only when an anxious Mrs. Lipmann banged on the door and asked whether he wanted his tea that the flow ceased and Mrs. Bradley, rising, said that she had a train to catch and must be going.

She had gained what she saw as the last clue to the deaths of Ronald Havant, Madame Setier, and Maisie Touch. It remained only to talk to lawyers.

The retired butler's tale, shorn of an excess of verbiage and such reminiscences as had nothing to do with Mrs. Bradley's enquiries, had dealt with the relationship between two little boys, their later days at public school, and all else that he had known of them until he had retired from service at Longwater Hall and had given place to his nephew a few years before the tragedy of young Ronald Havant's death.

The old man—his surname, oddly enough, was Butler—had joined the Longwater household as a boy and had never been in service elsewhere. He had risen in rank and remuneration in the way that his nephew had described and had served the squire's father and then the present Mr. Havant and had proposed the servants' toast at the latter's marriage.

He had held the infant Ronald on his knee and during the following years had watched him grow up. It had been in their prep. school days that Ronald had made friends with young Stone and, after that, no school holiday passed without Stone's spending at least a week at Longwater Hall, although a return visit by Ronald to Stone's home had never been known to occur.

"Master Ronnie never mentioned young Miss Stone, the sister, as far as I know," the ex-butler had told Mrs. Bradley, "after the terrible accident to old Mrs. Stone, the grandmother, but he was never interested in girls, anyway. I suppose that would have come later, if he had lived," added old Mr. Butler sadly.

It was during one summer holiday that the summerhouse tragedy and horror had occurred. It had been one of those summers which everybody is convinced was the normal thing when we all were young (thought Mrs. Bradley) and the lawns were scorched brown and the flimsily built summerhouse completely dried out and combustible.

"The first thing was Master Stone being laid up and Master Ronnie having to amuse himself on his own.

Youngsters do hate a sickroom, madam, don't they? It's unnatural, in their eyes. So when Master Ronnie had paid what one might call his duty visits, he had to make shift to amuse himself. He used to come into my pantry and have a chat and I'd have my glass of port and he'd have his lemonade—made with fresh lemons, of course, none of that unwholesome fizzy stuff, though, of course, he might have liked that better—and one day he asked me if I could get hold of some brushwood.

“‘Brushwood, Master Ronnie?’ I remember saying.”

“‘And a good length of rope to tie up a Paleface,’ he said. Well, of course, I thought it was all a piece of childish nonsense. I had no idea what brushwood was, although I had read Kipling's *Brushwood Boy*—very far-fetched, madam, don't you think, and a most unattractive young lady because, as soon as a widow's peak is mentioned, one automatically thinks of widows?”

“I don't care very much for the name Miriam, either,” Mrs. Bradley had stated.

No rope was provided, but a housemaid had found a ball of twine and given it to the little boy.

“And that was the trouble,” the old man had said. “If it had been rope, Master Ronnie might have been able to free the old lady, or she might have been able to free herself, but he must have tied the knots in the twine so tight to bind her to the bench that neither of them could undo them. Oh, yes, it was a teak bench she was tied to. A deckchair she might possibly have been able to drag out of the summerhouse with her still tied to it, but not that heavy bench.”

The rest of the story was even more terrible than the version Mrs. Bradley had received from the late vicar's wife.

Finding that, when his heap of twigs, shavings, and hay caught fire, he could not unfasten the knotted twine and free the old lady, Ronnie was too much alarmed at what he had done even to run back to the house and give the alarm

which might or might not have saved her life. The summerhouse was masked by a grove of tall trees and it was too far from the house for the old lady's cries to be heard—in fact, the medical evidence at the inquest suggested that she would have been suffocated by the smoke and probably unable to call out. Moreover, there had been no help at hand. No gardeners were working in the vicinity, the stables were half a mile away, and neither tennis nor croquet was being played on such an oppressively hot afternoon. Neither the child nor the old lady was missed until a servant was sent out by Mrs. Havant to tell them that it was tea-time.

Young Ronald had been brought back by a policeman who had found him sobbing and hysterical at the church lychgate two miles away in the village, but he was deemed too much upset to be questioned there and then, although he had to give evidence at the inquest. The verdict was death by misadventure and, by his father's orders, the subject was never mentioned again in the boy's hearing.

"It was a terrible time for all of us, as you may imagine, madam," said the old man, "the mistress so upset and the master so silent and the police and the inquest and everything. Master Ronnie picked up wonderful, though. After all, he was only nine years old and, of course, he had not been allowed to see the body and nobody spoke of what he had done. What did seem to me a bit strange was that Master Stone came for a week the next school holiday as usual, although, during the rest of my time at the Hall, his sister did not accompany him."

"So she was at the Hall at the time of her grandmother's death?" (Mrs. Bradley knew this, but wanted it confirmed.)

"Oh, yes. She was indoors with Master Stone who was laid up with his ankle and could not go out to play. The brother and sister were greatly attached to one another. She was the older by three or four years, I believe, and was

inclined to act as a mother to him, they having lost both parents.”

“Who was actually responsible for looking after the children?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“Old Mrs. Stone was in charge of the children. That, I suppose, is the reason for her having been at the Hall at the time. The grandmother’s house was in London, so I suppose it was a nice change for her, as well as for the children, to come down to the Hall for a break. After all, we had big grounds, the woods and the river, and the two little boys such good friends. Sometimes I thought young Miss Stone must have felt rather left out of it. I think she was almost glad of it when Master Stone was confined to the house while temporarily incapacitated and she could have him to herself.”

“I have met her. She interests me.”

“She never appeared at the Hall again after her grandmother’s death, as I believe I told you.”

“Never?”

“I meant never in my term of service at the Hall, madam. I always thought that, being that much older than her brother, she may have put together the bits she may have heard about the way her grandmother died and have got the horrors of it. Different from the two young gentlemen, whose friendship seemed as firm as ever.”

“Miss Stone, as she still was until she became Mrs. Martock, did visit the Hall again, though, did she not?”

“Oh, yes, I had it from my nephew Parsons. You know, madam, sometimes I think there is something in those stories I used to delight in as a boy. Some people appear to make some sort of disturbance in the air and things happen around them which do not appear to happen elsewhere. I believe Miss Stone was staying at the Hall when Master Ronnie was killed.”

“But the visit to Longwater Hall when her grandmother died in such dreadful circumstances was not her first one,

was it?"

"Oh, no, madam, as I explained, but I do know for a fact that it was she who told Master Ronnie about the nasty doings of Red Indians to white people, and the poor young innocent boy took up with the idea, although some might say that, even at nine years old, he ought to have known better. But, there, madam! All young boys are savages at heart, as romantic and as superstitious as in the Dark Ages, and unfortunately they view cruelty as an exposition of humour or well-merited revenge or maybe it satisfies some instinct in them for power and the conquering of another person's will. The world is a sad place, madam, in many respects. Sometimes—although one must not question the workings of Providence—sometimes I wonder whether mankind itself is a mistake and whether it would not have been very much better to have left the world to the dinosaurs."

"A sad philosophy, Mr. Butler. But you were telling me about Miss Stone and the deleterious effect she appeared to have upon her surroundings."

"Ah, that, madam, yes. Once Master Ronnie began at his first prep. school at the age of eight—far too young to send little boys right away from home, I always think, however good and kind the headmaster's wife or the school matron may be—he took up with young Master Stone and they became what is loosely called inseparable. After old Mrs. Stone's death a new school was found for Master Ronnie to break the association with the Stones, but it didn't work. Master Stone still came for holidays at Master Ronnie's insistence and, later on, they went to the same public school and to the same college."

"Were the Stone children very much attached to their grandmother?"

"Well, she was an autocratic old lady saddled with two lively children. I myself have heard her say to them, more than once, that she had not altered her will yet and that if

they were not dutiful and obedient—her exact words, madam—she was not going to alter her will in their favour. A charity would get all the money and they would be left selling matches in the street and wearing ragged clothes and with no shoes to their feet.”

“How eminently Victorian!”

“I believe she was a very wealthy woman, madam. The threat could have been impressive.”

“And *did* she alter her will?”

“I hardly think she would have had time, madam.”

“The threat was an idle one, no doubt. The children were always to have been the beneficiaries had she lived, I should think.”

“That may be right, madam, although I did hear that the will had already been altered once. It came from old Mrs. Stone herself when she was admonishing young Master Stone for some lapse of good manners or something of the sort. She would say that kind of thing in front of the domestic staff as though we had neither eyes nor ears. She said that he had better behave himself, or she would treat him and his sister the way she had treated their parents, whom she had quarrelled with and disinherited. I heard her say to him, ‘You will get nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing! Your father was to get nothing and you will get nothing,’ she said, ‘unless I see a more mannerly and less oafish boy. Your sister, who at least knows better than to answer back when she is scolded, shall have it all. If *she* does not behave herself, it will all go to charity.’”

“Dear me! And she died before even the sister could benefit, perhaps.”

“When the children were with their new guardians, a lawsuit was brought, but nothing could be done. The will was correctly signed and witnessed and the people who managed the charity stood out for their rights, pointing out that the children were not destitute, since there was money left them by their father, although, of course, it would not

have approached the fortune they would have inherited from the old lady."

"Which, it seems, may or may not have come to them if she had lived. However, blood is thicker than water, and we must assume that her ultimate intentions would have been honourable. In any case, I think the courts would have allowed the children something as next-of-kin, you know," said Mrs. Bradley before she left. She took a taxi to the Waldorf, had tea, and caught a train for Brockenhurst. Here George had the car waiting for her. "Well," she said, "I have spent an interesting and, I think, an illuminating day, George. I have been listening to what I can truly describe as a gothick tale of violent, extremely horrid death and a will which I am certain would have been altered in due course. Are you a lover of cats, George?"

"I affect a tolerance towards the animal which has attached itself to the stables, madam, but our mutual regard is not more than lukewarm."

"Nothing has happened during my short absence, I suppose?"

"Nothing but a remarkably phrased saying from Miss Cummings, madam. When she relayed your telephone call to me—the call which you made from Waterloo station telling her the time of your train—she told me she had had another call earlier and ended by saying to me, 'Hold your horses, Mr. Jehu. I think we're off.'"

"*Miss Cummings* said that?"

"Yes, madam, and in a voice fraught with anticipatory excitement."

"Dear me! As Bertie Wooster once said of the Unbidden Guest, someone's been feeding her meat."

"Approaching nuptials have a tendency to send up a young lady's blood-pressure, madam. That is the explanation, I fancy."

Miss Cummings, however, was her usual demure and competent self when Mrs. Bradley entered the house. She

produced the telephone pad on which she had recorded the message.

"The caller gave the name of Denefield, Mrs. Bradley, and asked whether you would be prepared to go to the flat as it was not possible, because of a sprained ankle, for the caller to come to you."

"The caller was Jessica Denefield and asked whether I would be prepared to go to her flat?"

"No, Mrs. Bradley. The call *purported* to come from Jessica Denefield, but I am sure the voice was disguised. I think the call came from a man."

"Curiouser and curiouser! Well, whether the caller was a man or a woman, it certainly was not Jessica Denefield. She has no telephone at her flat or at her school and if she has a sprained ankle she is hardly likely to have been able to walk to a public callbox. The caller has underrated our intelligence or else is in a state of such anxiety that he or she is unable to resist making even this suspect attempt to establish contact with me. Ring up Longwater Hall and ask the caretaker whether Mrs. Martock is in residence."

The reply was explicit. Mrs. Martock had left her flat two hours previously, had taken a suitcase, and was not expected back for the rest of the week.

"Of course," said Miss Cummings, "even if Miss Denefield is not on the telephone, perhaps somebody in the downstairs shop may be. That could account for the man's voice which I am sure I heard."

"Perhaps. You think of everything."

"Oh, I would not say *that*, Mrs. Bradley."

Mrs. Bradley cackled and then said, "I shall visit Jessica Denefield very shortly. I am sure you told the caller that I was not at home, so whoever it was will not expect to see me this evening and neither will he or she do so."

"Are you in danger?"

"Oh, yes, if one calls it that. I think somebody has found out that I visited old Mr. Butler."

"May I come with you to see Miss Denefield?"

"No, my dear. I shall operate better without you, although I am grateful for your concern. I shall have George and my little (actually licensed) gun. Besides, I should be loth to bring down the ire of your fiancé upon my head."

"So that caller *is* dangerous!"

"Trapped animals are always dangerous. One must be armed and well prepared, that's all, and I shall be both. The trouble is that I am very sorry for trapped animals."

"I don't understand, although I agree in principle, of course," said Miss Cummings.

Jessica's letter-card came by the morning post and certainly contained no reference to sprained ankles or a telephone call.

17

The Show-Down

"I think the quarry has baited its own trap," said Mrs. Bradley. "Send a pre-paid telegram to the Barge School, Canal Bridge, Willowford and ask whether Miss Denefield has sprained her ankle. I am sure she has not done so, but it is better to be on the safe side before taking action."

"A strange philosophy, coming from you," said Miss Cummings, going off to fulfil the commission. Jessica's reply came the same afternoon, so, with the remark that the decks were now cleared for action, Mrs. Bradley telephoned Detective-Superintendent Salcombe and asked him whether he was prepared to give the girl and her mother police protection.

"In return," she said, "I will give you enough information for you to arrest and charge your murderer."

"Well, I don't know," said Salcombe. "Miss Denefield hasn't made any recent complaint to us of being followed or harassed."

"Do you expect her to ask for your help, after the way you have treated her?"

"We have our job to do, ma'am."

"Well, I must leave your job to you and I must be off to do mine. I have received a bogus telephone call which attempted to lure me to your town last evening. I think somebody is becoming desperate."

"I can't make it a matter of police protection for Miss Denefield without more reason than you give me, but I'll see that we keep an eye on the Barge School and the flat."

"Good. Somebody who seems to be 'ware and waking'—do you sing 'Drake's Drum'? I would suppose you to have a pleasant baritone voice—somebody has decided that the game is almost finished and that it is time to make the last throw. I have taken what measures as occurred to me to bring about a situation which should result in a confrontation."

"A show-down do you mean, ma'am?"

"Your tone indicates scepticism, but, yes, that is what I mean. I have attempted to sow the wind and am now in expectation of reaping the whirlwind. I hope 'reaping' is the operative word, for it denotes a successful outcome which was not foreseen by the originator of the text."

As soon as she had rung off, she telephoned her good friend the High Sheriff of her county.

"Charles," she said, "are you on speaking terms with your opposite number in the shire directly west of you?"

"Old Cyril? Surely, Beatrice. Our fathers were in the same regiment. What's your will with him?"

"Ask him to tell his Chief Constable to get the local police at Olquay (reference will be the village of Longwater Sedge) to re-open their files on the death by shooting of a young man called Ronald Havant. It happened about sixteen years ago."

"Right. Another of your murders?"

"I think so."

"What a dangerous woman you are! Is nobody's reputation safe from you?"

"It depends upon what it is. Have you put down those places and the name Havant? There is a connection with Longwater Hall."

"Longwater Sedge seems a dangerous place in which to domicile oneself. Wasn't there a rather suspect death by

drowning in the River Longwater fairly recently?"

"It ties up with the rest of the story." She rang off and then paid an unannounced visit to her son's wife, who was in and welcomed her warmly.

"I suppose," said her daughter-in-law, "you can stay to lunch? Better still, as Ferdinand won't be home for it, why don't we go out? My treat, of course."

"Thank you, but no. I cannot stay as long as that."

"Right. I was going to have mine on a tray. Will that suit you?"

"Admirably. I was hoping to ask Ferdinand to do something for me in connection with a case I am working on."

"Leave the details with me and I'll see that he does it."

"I want him to find out who were the lawyers who drew up the will of a Mrs. Rosetta Stone and whether the original draft was ever altered. I can check the will myself at Somerset House, but whether the testator altered her plans of leaving her fortune to charity and revoked the will in favour of her grandchildren is of great importance."

"Rosetta Stone? Oh, he's done that. He was going to write to you. You've kept us abreast of your activities, bless you!—and he's been extremely interested. I know where the file is. I'll get it for you. You won't need to bother with Somerset House. All the details will be here. You know how thorough he is when he gets his teeth into anything."

After a light lunch they examined the file together.

"Well, I don't know what *you* think," said Ferdinand's wife, "but it seems, from what I've read in your letters and from what Ferdinand has said, that there's motive here for the murder of Ronald Havant and that could also account for the murder of the blackmailing Setier woman and the drowning of that village girl."

"Yes, I agree. If Maisie Touch was right, and there *were* two guns, Ronald Havant was not shot by Stone. From all that I have been told, Stone would not have murdered his

friend, but, of course, one cannot be sure of that, and he did confess to the killing."

"Yes, he accepted blame, but why, if he didn't do it?"

"Ah, but, if you remember, he pleaded accident."

"And got away with it!"

"But seems to have left a confession of murder in case any evidence came up later that the death had *not* been accidental. I feel sure that the confession was written by Stone. I have been in contact with the widow of the clergyman to whom the document was entrusted and I discovered, with her help, that it had probably been destroyed when the clergyman died."

"You have not asked me any questions about Ferdinand's visit to Rosetta Stone's lawyers. He tracked them down when you found out her full name."

"He has saved me from having to pay them a visit and from having to persuade them that I am a right and proper person to make the necessary enquiries. As a lawyer himself —"

"Yes, it was much easier for him to get the information than it would have been for anybody outside the profession."

"So Rosetta Stone had every intention of altering her will in favour of the children and it seems, from Ferdinand's notes, that she had even made a rough draft of her intentions."

"Yes, but she died before the new will could be properly drawn up, signed, and witnessed. I should think Mrs. Martock broods over all the money she and her brother would have had except for Ronnie Havant and his box of matches! I can understand her feelings, I must say."

"Yes, she must by now have given up all hope of upsetting her grandmother's will. As for Setier, she ran the risk all blackmailers run."

"That, after a point, one of the victims will act like a cornered rat and fight back, yes, indeed. Which victim

remains to be seen. A blackmailer's eggs are seldom all in one basket."

As soon as she got back to the Stone House, Mrs. Bradley was met by Miss Cummings, who had taken down a telephone message from Jessica Denefield.

"She made the call during her dinner hour," said Miss Cummings excitedly. "She says that somebody has taken the front room over a shop opposite and she is certain her flat is being watched from there."

"Dear me! I suppose somebody is waiting for me to pay a visit to Jessica's sprained ankle. Well, we must not disappoint whoever it is."

"But Miss Denefield hasn't sprained her ankle."

"No, but perhaps my humanitarian nature has been taken for granted. I shall visit the flat tomorrow afternoon while Jessica and her mother are at work."

"But nobody will be there to let you in."

"It is only necessary that I shall be seen to enter the alley which leads to the back yard of the shop."

"I do wish you would not take risks."

"Only carefully calculated ones. Put me through to Detective-Superintendent Salcombe again."

"I don't like it, ma'am," he said, when her call came through. "It's true that a couple have taken Shandy's front room. Miss Denefield reported that. The young lady is very jumpy and unhappy about it and swears she is being watched. I'm not impressed. Shandy has let his front room before. The flats above those shops are like Miss Denefield's own, very commodious. Shandy and Lushman live above their shops, but there's lots of accommodation they don't really need. Shandy lets his when he can. Lushman's got kids, so he hasn't so much space to spare, perhaps, or else he doesn't want Gentiles in his house."

"I see. Well, I have no wish to dramatise the situation, but if you don't want another case of murder on your hands, I suggest that you have some men in the vicinity of Miss Denefield's flat from two o'clock onwards tomorrow afternoon."

"They'll be noticeable. It's early-closing day."

"Much the most exciting day of the week in your town, it seems, and ideal from a murderer's point of view."

At nine on the following morning Mrs. Bradley sent Miss Cummings to the post office.

"If my suspicions are correct," she said, "the people who have rented rooms above Shandy's shop will see the telegraph boy arrive and, with any luck, will take that as a sign of my intention to visit the supposedly injured Jessica today."

"They won't know that the telegram comes from you. A telegram goes direct, like a letter."

"That is why I invoked the goddess of luck."

"So do the people who play roulette," said Miss Cummings severely, "and this present project, if you don't mind my saying so, savours of *Russian* roulette, and we all know how *that* ends!"

"Your strictures are well deserved, but I want an end to this business and what I propose to do is likely to be the quickest way to bring it to a conclusion."

"You remind me of Ivan Petruski Skivar."

"More Russian roulette?"

"He could imitate Irving, play euchre and pool, and perform on the Spanish guitar," said Miss Cummings, "and look what happened to *him*!"

"My dear Miss Cummings, you go from strength to strength! Are you as caustic as this with your fiancé? Do you give him awful warnings for his own good?"

"He sings the song, that is all, but I consider that it contains a moral for all of us."

"Dear me! And what is that?"

“Not to meddle in other people’s business, especially when it is dangerous to do so.”

“But, if I remember the words of the song, Ivan was very little to blame in the matter.”

“Oh, but indeed he was, Mrs. Bradley! He trod on the toe of a notoriously belligerent Bulbul, and you appear to be desirous of emulating him. He asked for trouble.”

“How much I shall miss you when you get married and leave me! Nobody else seems to have this anxiety for my safety. It is so good of you to bother and I do appreciate it.”

“It doesn’t seem to make any difference to how you go about your affairs, but I have to satisfy my conscience.”

“And I mine. I am not the least concerned about the death of Madame Setier except to free Jessica Denefield from any suspicion of having caused it, but Maisie Touch’s drowning was quite unnecessary and I am sure that her murderer knew perfectly well that nobody would have believed such a simpleton. In any case, all that she probably disclosed was that she had seen the shooting. I doubt whether she knew the name Stone.”

“Still, wasn’t there an attempt at blackmail on her part?”

“I doubt it. She had already told Scally, and I think she realised that he did not believe her. She probably blurted it out to Mrs. Martock, too, but without realising that there was any danger to herself in confiding her knowledge to anyone. To Maisie it would seem to have happened so long ago that it had no relevance except as an item of interest.”

“She might not have recognised Mrs. Martock as the former Miss Stone. It is hardly likely that the latter frequented the kitchen,” said Miss Cummings. “Oh, yes, I can see now how it would have been. I suppose the shooting was the most eventful thing in the poor creature’s life.”

“Except her untimely death,” said Mrs. Bradley.

After that, it was, as Detective-Sergeant Bedford put it, "all go." The high-street shops were open until one p.m. and at intervals during the morning men in plain clothes entered the grocer's and the greengrocer's and did not emerge. Only one man went to each shop and, as there were other customers during the morning, Salcombe was taking the chance that Bedford and his comrade, having gone into the shops but failed to come out again, would not be noticed by the watchers at Shandy's window.

Mrs. Bradley, meanwhile, was motoring from the Stone House by way of Lyndhurst, Romsey, and Winchester. After Staines it was a straight run eastwards and then over the canal bridge. Almost opposite Jessica's flat the car stopped and Mrs. Bradley got out.

"You can park in the marketplace, I expect, George," she said, rehearsing a previous instruction for the benefit of the occupants of Shandy's upstairs room in the confident expectation that one of them, if not both, had recognised the car and had opened the window to hear what was said. "I'll have some lunch at the Beehive. Get yourself something somewhere and I'll walk back to the marketplace when I've paid my visit. Call it two hours from now. I shall not stay long with Miss Denefield."

"Very good, madam," said George, picking up his cue and speaking out of the open front window of the car. He drove on and Mrs. Bradley followed on foot, for the Beehive was on the next corner. The time was almost two o'clock, but biscuits, cheese, and a glass of sherry did not take long to consume, so, well before the pub closed at half-past two, she was crossing the high street to the alley which led to the grocer's yard and the stairs to Jessica's flat.

Under the archway to the alley she found Detective-Sergeant Bedford, well out of sight of any windows.

"They've been in the flat a matter of twenty minutes," he said in a hushed voice. "Constable Verity and I watched from the shop windows next along here and, as soon as we

saw them cross the road after your car came, we nipped out through the back of the shops. Verity is behind a pile of packing-cases in the yard."

"Well, I mustn't loiter," said Mrs. Bradley. "I don't want to arouse their suspicions."

"You're not going to stick your neck out, ma'am. I've got my orders. We know they're there and I can't take the responsibility." He gave a whistle and opened the door to the yard. The constable appeared. They mounted the wooden stairs, but very quietly, and Bedford knocked somewhat delicately on the door. Mrs. Bradley followed the two men.

"Come in. It's open," said a female voice which Mrs. Bradley recognised. The door was only pulled to. It had been forced; that much was clear. Bedford gave it a mighty kick and stepped back almost on to the constable's toes.

"Police," he called out. "Open up!" As he spoke, a heavy object came crashing down on to the corridor matting. It was the remaining griffin. Standing on either side of the now open doorway were a man and a woman. "Back there! Inside!" Bedford said curtly. "What do you think you're doing on enclosed premises? I am going to charge you with breaking and entering. More serious charges may follow. You need say nothing in answer to the charge, but anything you *do* say will be taken down and may be given in evidence."

"Take down what you damn well like," said the man. "I suppose this is what you blighters call 'a fair cop.'"

"Well, so it is," said the woman, "but if it hadn't been for that reptile there"—she indicated Mrs. Bradley, who had just stepped forward and picked up the griffin—"you wouldn't be here today and she would be dead for not minding her own business. All right. I *did* shoot Ronnie Havant, but surely you're not going to bring that up after all these years? Anyway, it was an accident."

"There was also the little matter of Maisie Touch," said Mrs. Bradley mildly. "Was that an accident, too, Mrs.

Martock?"

"Of course it was," said the man. "My name is Stone, if you want to know. I had an accident, too. I hit a blackmailer over the head with one of those things." He pointed to the griffin which Mrs. Bradley was holding. "That French bitch was a human blowfly and deserved everything she got. I only wish I'd swatted her years ago."

"Ronnie Havant did us out of our rightful money," said Mrs. Martock, "and I'll tell you—"

"Tell it to the judge," said Bedford.

"Shall 'ee do as her say, and ask for that little country school in the village next to where her live?" asked Mrs. Denefield. "I'd like fine to live in the country again."

"There's a school house attached. Yes, I'd like it, too, if they'll give me the post."

"I reckon 'em will if her's a-backen of 'ee up. A right kind of a wetch I reckon her to be."

"No. She's a very clever and a very kind woman. She isn't a witch."

"Any road, it 'ud take all the time I got to be upsides wi' she. One thing as her never knowed, though, but it enna wanted now."

"What would that be, mum?"

"Sommat as our dad coulda said to crowner at inquest on poor Master Ronald."

"I heard all about what dad said and what he could have said."

"Not this 'ee never. He on'y said it the once and you was in bed."

"What was it, anyway?"

"He said as how he yeard a couple of shots what didn't sound like t'others."

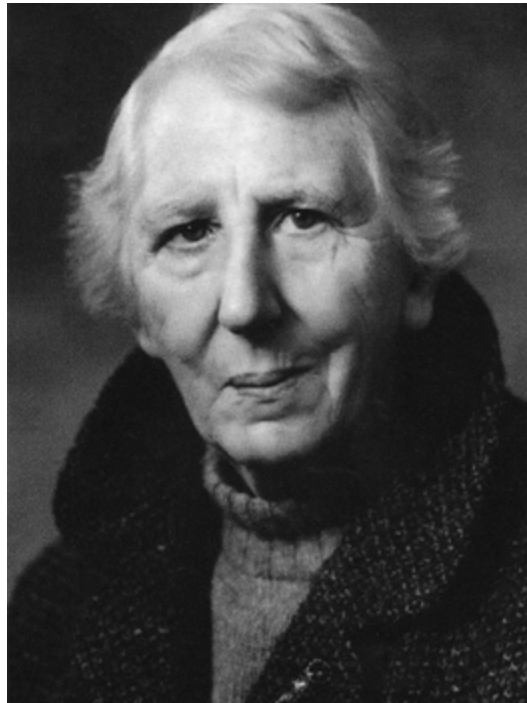
"Well, we know now that there were two rifles and that Mrs. Martock fetched the second one from the house and

shot Mr. Ronnie before she ran into the walled garden. She's confessed."

"That's my meanen. *Afore* she run into walled garden. If our dad had on'y thought to say that bit, inquest 'ud have come out different and maybe us wouldn't have needed to live in this dirty great place where I ben a-feared all the time."

"At any rate, the police took away the other griffin, so I suppose they're together again, as they ought to be. Now I'll be quit of them for ever." But for some reason which she could not have explained, Jessica spoke with regret.

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.